

Narrating Historians: Crises of Historical Authority in Twentieth-Century British Fiction

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## Abstract

MOLLY WESTERMAN: Narrating Historians: Crises of Historical Authority in  
Twentieth-Century British Fiction  
(Under the direction of Pamela Cooper)

“Narrating Historians” takes an original and self-consciously interdisciplinary approach to debates over the relationship between fiction and history. By shifting the emphasis from fictional representations of history (the past) to novels that ventriloquize *practitioners* of history (the discipline), it foregrounds the dual function of scholarly discourses as they simultaneously convey knowledge and construct their own authority. This study traces a narrative technique that forges telling points of contact between narrative fiction and historical authority, a technique that ties novels intimately to realities outside their fictions. It embraces the complexity of exchanges between history and literature by taking seriously each as a historically-situated way of knowing.

The project’s selection of literary texts is guided more by the history of historical knowledge than by conventional literary-historical categories. Each of the works it engages was composed during a period of intense disagreement regarding whether and how historians can know the past: the first in the years between the two world wars, and again during Margaret Thatcher’s tenure as Prime Minister. Diverse texts, including Virginia Woolf’s *Orlando*, Robert Graves’s *I, Claudius*, John Fowles’s *A Maggot*, John Banville’s *The Newton Letter*, Graham Swift’s *Waterland*, and Simon Schama’s *Dead Certainties*, illustrate how their shared narrative stance supports varying positions on the nature of historical knowledge. This dissertation demonstrates not only that the dissemination and acquisition of knowledge are situated within and limited by discursive

conventions, but also that those conventions enable productive self-reflection within and dynamic connections between established ways of knowing.

To my most admired colleague and favorite historian,  
Eric William Weber.

## Preface

This dissertation addresses the historical engagements of Virginia Woolf's *Orlando: A Biography* (1928), Robert Graves's *I, Claudius* (1934) and *Claudius the God* (1934), John Fowles's *A Maggot* (1985), John Banville's *The Newton Letter* (1982), Graham Swift's *Waterland* (1983), and Simon Schama's *Dead Certainties (Unwarranted Speculations)* (1991): an eclectic group, in which virtually any generalization requires an exception or explanation. Though all were produced by British writers<sup>1</sup> during the twentieth century, they are far from uniform in aesthetic sensibility, literary-historical period, or even genre. Nor do all endorse a similar philosophy of history. What these texts share, however, is a feature that implicates them in a discussion of historians and their discipline rather than a more abstract consideration of history in the sense of the past and how 'we' know it. Each is what I will call a *historian's text*, which is to say that each presents itself (though to varying degrees within a fictional framework) as though it were produced by a historian, whether its first-person narrator is a professional historian or its third-person narrator sometimes or always takes on what I will characterize as a historian's voice.

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<sup>1</sup> Even this generalization requires explanation. Banville is Irish, a point of much significance to his work but little addressed in this dissertation; he is therefore "British" insofar as that adjective refers to the British Isles but not in its more specific application to Great Britain or the United Kingdom. Schama (though London-born and Cambridge-educated) moved to the United States in 1980 and wrote *Dead Certainties* from his Harvard post. The significant point for my purposes, however, is that Woolf, Graves, Fowles, Banville, Swift, and Schama were all aware of and impacted by the historiographic debates at play in British culture between the wars and during the Thatcherite period, debates discussed at length in the introduction.

By speaking as historians, these texts position their readers imaginatively (and to varying degrees actually) as readers of history. The fiction of this stance—the disconnect between readers’ role as receivers of these fictional historians’ words and our role as readers of the novels sitting before us and clearly labelled Literature/Fiction—makes the role of receiver-of-historical-knowledge a self-conscious one. And through this complexly layered rhetorical situation, these novels are able to (and indeed in some cases cannot help but) participate in debates about the discipline of history even though neither they nor the mass of their readers are subject to the procedures and conventions of that discipline. In other words, by performing a non-novelistic and widely-accepted mode of intellectual authority, these texts connect with and comment upon realities outside their fictions. As the introduction discusses in greater detail, the periods of these texts’ publication—the years between the two world wars and the Thatcherite era—were times when generally accepted and obvious-seeming aspects of historical knowledge and history’s authority came under questioning both within and outside the discipline. In this study, I argue that the novels I label *fictional historians’ texts* work to make readers at these moments of disciplinary instability more or less skeptical consumers of history, or of particular sorts of history—or, torn between the two directions, sometimes shore up the discipline’s authority and sometimes kick at its foundations. More broadly, the dissertation reflects upon the operation of epistemological authority as it is embedded in familiar discourses. Its readings suggest not only that the dissemination and acquisition of knowledge are situated within and limited by discursive conventions, but also that those conventions enable productive self-reflection within and dynamic connections between established ways of knowing.

Most examinations of historical fiction and historiographic metafiction focus on texts' engagements with the historical past and with theories about historical knowledge, to the exclusion of the ways in which these fictions interact with disciplinary history and its epistemological authority. Because the multiple meanings of "history" are intimately intertwined, my concerns overlap often with those of Linda Hutcheon, Amy J. Elias, Barbara Foley, and the many authors whose articles I cite in the following chapters. Focusing largely on fictions' borrowings from and contributions to various philosophies of history, these critics offer illuminating readings of ways in which twentieth-century novels pose and, however tentatively, answer questions such as *What does it mean to know the past? Can we know the past? What is the ontological status of the past?* Yet little attention has been paid to the question at the heart of my own project: *How do pieces of narrative fiction engage the authority of knowledge produced by professional historiography and historical pedagogy?* In other words, in the midst of so much interest in literature's preoccupation with history (the past), we have overlooked fiction's fascinating engagements with another sort of history: the discipline and its practitioners. This dissertation takes seriously the dialogue between history-obsessed fictions and the history of disciplinary history.

After an introductory chapter providing a more detailed analysis of the workings of fictional historians' texts and of twentieth-century British disciplinary history, the dissertation attends first to texts produced between the Great War and the Second World War; its final three chapters turn to texts produced during Margaret Thatcher's tenure as



Prime Minister.<sup>2</sup> Though these dates are most easily delimited with reference to political events, the periods' real significance to this study lies in their historiographic events—which are themselves intimately linked to the trauma of the Great War and to Conservative efforts in the arenas of school history and the English Heritage movement. Between 1918 and 1939, and between 1979 and 1990, polarizing debates raged within and (amongst artists, philosophers, and, especially in the later period, the broader public) about academic history's access to historical truth. These debates shape the historical engagements of my project's main texts and are the subject of further discussion in the introduction.

In the two chapters following the introduction, Woolf and Graves serve as counterpoints and illustrate the flexibility of the form of the fictional historian's text. Chapter two reads *Orlando* in the context of writings across Woolf's career and argues that Woolf is never able to endorse or decry Victorian historical authority, unable to accept it intellectually or ethically but also unwilling to throw away its very real power. On the other hand, the next chapter finds that the Claudius novels demand that readers accept Graves's historical authority as related to that of the discipline, embrace the authority of that discipline, but not question Graves's flagrant divergence from various disciplinary traditions, procedures, and conventions. Both *Orlando* and *I, Claudius* are implicated in the fundamental questioning of historical knowledge that became influential

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<sup>2</sup> Thatcher led the Conservative party beginning in 1975 and served as Prime Minister from May 1979 through November 1990. Though *Dead Certainties* appeared as a book in 1991, it was at least largely composed and partially published (in *Granta* 32 and 34, as “The Many Deaths of General Wolfe” and “Death of a Harvard Man”) during Thatcher's tenure.

in Britain at the time, but the two novels confront history's mixture of authority and uncertainty from wildly differing stances.

The dissertation then moves into the 1980s with *A Maggot*, claiming that this novel instructs readers to believe 'proper historians' but cannot actually endorse 'proper history,' trapped in the false dichotomy of total knowledge or total meaninglessness that becomes so prevalent in the historical debates of the period. Chapter five pairs two novels, *The Newton Letter* and *Waterland*, which share an obsession with the intersection of gender and history but relate in opposed ways to the then-new field of gender history, which approaches gender as historically contingent. While both novels project images of ahistorical womanhood, *The Newton Letter* extends pointed irony to its historian narrator's habit of imagining women outside and in opposition to historical thought. Finally, the dissertation closes with a discussion of *Dead Certainties*, which (with its historian author) takes us to the very verge of disciplinary history while still working in part as a fictional historians' text. Reviewers vehemently critiqued *Dead Certainties* for what it says to historians, but my concluding chapter insists that this text (like all the project's texts) actually and importantly directs itself to *readers* of history, in this case training us to take a more active part in interpretation.

My hope, of course, is that the chapters prove illuminative of the workings of each text under consideration, but my detailed readings of these fictions are also meant to make a larger point. By examining a particular narrative technique that engages fictional texts in a non-fictional discourse's and an academic institution's claims about reality, I aim to make apparent the need for attention to novels' quite concrete and visible discursive relationships with other epistemological authorities. Only through careful

attention to the details of a variety of texts can we perceive the elasticity of the fictional historian's text, which cannot help but refer to our reception of a historian's discourse but can do so to a range of effects—to destabilize our trust with recourse to the uncertainty of the period, to reinforce a popular audience's still-powerful faith in the historian's knowledge, or to break down the obvious truth of a particular procedure, convention, tradition, or historian while shoring up other aspects or forms of the discipline's authority.

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## CHAPTER ONE

### Introduction:

#### Narrating Historians in Twentieth-Century Britain

History as a scholarly discipline—as a specialized and professional mode of knowing, supported and restricted by a set of conventions and institutions—has existed only since the early nineteenth century. Before that period, literature and history were generally viewed as kindred modes of knowing, each addressing a non-specialist audience through carefully-styled narratives. The simplest story of history's history would then proceed to a modern historiography influenced by nineteenth-century German historian Leopold von Ranke, a scientific history striving to know the past for the past's sake—to describe the past factually rather than turning to it for inspiration for, warning to, or validation of the present. Yet history's history is not simple: historical knowledge is produced in multiple forms and traditions at the same time, varying both amongst and within nations. And although mainstream professional history is founded upon the obviousness of an opposition between reliable historical fact and dubious literary embellishment, that obviousness has never quite quelled questioning, uncertainty, and alternative approaches both within and in response to the discipline.

This dissertation focuses on texts that bring together narrative fiction and disciplinary history by speaking historians' voices or performing historians' work in a fictional context. They do so during two periods when the relationship between historical scholarship and literary narrative became particularly contested: in the years between the

two world wars, and again during Margaret Thatcher's tenure as Prime Minister. Rather than a particular literary movement, then, this study's connective tissue is a narrative technique, a feature by which certain fictional texts paradoxically engage this academic discipline whose mainstream approach throughout the twentieth century has striven to *sever* itself from literary and especially fictional narrative. The following chapters concern themselves primarily with Virginia Woolf's *Orlando: A Biography* (1928), Robert Graves's *I, Claudius* (1934) and *Claudius the God* (1934), John Fowles's *A Maggot* (1985), John Banville's *The Newton Letter* (1982), Graham Swift's *Waterland* (1983), and Simon Schama's *Dead Certainties (Unwarranted Speculations)* (1991). In posing as the discourse of a historian, each of these texts implicates itself in its period's divisive debates over the proper audience of disciplinary history, and over the proper relationship between that scholarly discourse and storytelling.

It is no mere coincidence that the periods of my texts' production—the years I outline below in terms of historical-epistemological rather than literary-aesthetic shifts—are also, however roughly, the heights of “modernism” and “postmodernism” as my own discipline generally employs these terms. Literary modernists including Woolf (the subject of chapter two), T. S. Eliot, Ezra Pound, W. B. Yeats, Ford Madox Ford, and D. H. Lawrence were influenced by fin-de-siècle philosophies of history,<sup>3</sup> the rise of professionalism,<sup>4</sup> the increasing valuation and authority of scientific as opposed to artistic

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<sup>3</sup> On Eliot and Pound, see Longenbach. On Yeats, Ford, Lawrence, and Pound, see Williams.

<sup>4</sup> Not only history but also literature and literary criticism professionalized during the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. For an insightful reading of this development's impact on the literary modernists, see Collier, who distinguishes between, on one hand, Eliot's and Pound's association of amateurism, commercialism, and prostitution—the

forms of knowing, and the horror of the Great War and dread of a sequel—in short, influenced by many of the same factors that prompted a disciplinary and extra-disciplinary shakiness of historical knowledge. Literary postmodernists including Fowles (the subject of chapter four), Banville and Swift (of chapter five), Jeanette Winterson, and Peter Ackroyd—to name only a handful of British novelists—similarly respond to factors in their period’s historical-epistemological shifts within and regarding disciplinary history: most notably, the rise of poststructuralist philosophy, a conservative political environment, and arguably elitist, racist, and sexist representations of the past as treasured English heritage. Many modernist and postmodernist literary productions therefore engage questions of the ontological status of the past, what it means (and whether it is theoretically and practically possible) to know the past, and who ought to have the authority to narrate and interpret the past. Indeed, these engagements have been the subject of considerable critical attention in recent decades and have proven illuminative of the aesthetics and politics of literary modernism and postmodernism.<sup>5</sup>

Yet, while literary modernism and postmodernism intersect with the concerns of this study, my focus remains on how a narrative technique implicates texts in particular historical-epistemological debates—and it seems to me that foregrounding literary-historical categories is more a hindrance than a help to this effort. Here lies my most fundamental departure from the excellent work of Linda Hutcheon and Amy J. Elias: while these critics strive to understand postmodernist literature’s stance toward the past,

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devaluing of amateurism and its gendering as feminine—and, on the other hand, Woolf’s valuing of amateurism and distaste for a professionalism she saw as commercializing.

<sup>5</sup> See for instance Longenbach, Williams, Hutcheon (*The Politics of Postmodernism* and *A Poetics of Postmodernism*), Elias (*Sublime Desire*), and Jameson (*Postmodernism*), in addition to countless history-minded studies of individual authors and texts.



toward historical existence, and toward a wide variety of modes of narrating both the past and being-in-historical-time, my aim is to understand how novels in an age of professional history (a period encompassing but certainly not limited to the late twentieth century) engage this discipline and bolster, undermine, and/or modify the authority of the knowledge it produces.<sup>6</sup> It would be problematic at best to define Robert Graves as a modernist or Simon Schama as a postmodernist (however often Schama's critics fling the term at him), but a larger problem is even more to the point here: labelling Woolf and Eliot "modernists" does not help us see the care with which Woolf reflects upon the historical approaches of *both* the Victorian historians *and* contemporary artists' and philosophers' rejections of their narratives and methods. Nor does labelling Winterson, Ackroyd, and Swift "postmodernists" help us distinguish between the historical questioning of a novel such as Winterson's *Sexing the Cherry* (1989) or Ackroyd's *Chatterton* (1987), on one hand, and that of *Waterland*, on the other. Yet they differ vitally: while *Sexing the Cherry* and *Chatterton* focus on the ontology of historical time and the relationship between historical existence and human identity, fictional historians' texts—postmodernist or otherwise—foreground the epistemology of historical knowledge by dramatizing its formation and transmission. Even viewing a single author through the lens of "postmodernism" blurs differences like those I trace in chapter four between Fowles's *The French Lieutenant's Woman* (1969) and his later *A Maggot*.

In seeking to illuminate the interactions between fictional historians' texts and disciplinary history, therefore, I have selected and contextualized literary texts in

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<sup>6</sup> Because most works to date on these issues and texts focus on either the 'modernist' or the 'postmodernist' period (or on a single author or novel), I have chosen to engage theoretical and critical discussions as they become relevant in each chapter rather than including a literature review in the introduction.

reference to the history of British historical knowledge rather than according to literary-historical categories of period or movement. I focus on a handful of narratives that fit into two categories, one narratological and one historical: each fictional narrative presents itself as though it were produced by a historian, and each was composed during a period of intense questioning regarding whether and how historians can know the past.

Accordingly, this introductory chapter offers preliminary sketches of the narrative stance shared by these texts, the nature of these periods of historical-epistemological doubt, and the relationships between these narrative techniques and historical conditions. Its first section focuses on narrative, analysing the rhetorical situation of fictional historians' texts as the point of contact between the fictions and the extra-disciplinary authority of disciplinary history. Its second reads the debates into which the texts' narrative stances throw them, characterizing the history of British historical thought as complex and nonlinear in its relationships with popular audiences and literary narrative. By narrating historians' voices outside the boundaries of their discipline, these texts participate in debates about and within disciplinary history, dramatizing these debates for an extra-disciplinary audience.

### **Historian Narrators and Historians' Readers**

While all of my main texts are historians' texts, presenting themselves as though they were produced by historians,<sup>7</sup> their narrative stances also vary significantly. Most

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<sup>7</sup> *Dead Certainties* problematizes this category and definition by not just *posing as* but actually *being* a text produced by a trained, professional historian. Chapter six considers the differences and similarities between this historian's text, which includes some fictional discourse and many literary flourishes but presents a historian's accounts of two

obviously, some perform the position of the historian through an intradiegetic narrator who is a professional historian, while some employ an extradiegetic narrator who sometimes or always takes on a historian's voice.<sup>8</sup> More precisely: Swift and Banville explicitly set up historian narrators who are also characters in their stories, Graves both has emperor-historian Claudius narrate and himself acts the historian as implied translator/editor/author, Schama's project sits uneasily between history and fiction and has a historian author as well as historian characters, Woolf employs an extradiegetic and heterodiegetic consciousness positioned variously as historian, biographer, novelist, and poet, and Fowles's narrator acts and speaks as a history teacher presenting students with fascinating archival materials. The stance does not require a particular view with regard to the possibility or proper form of historical knowledge, as the following chapters illustrate with regard to these texts' complex and contradictory historical-epistemological

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actual historical events, and the project's other main texts, which tell more clearly fictional stories and were written by novelists rather than historians.

<sup>8</sup> The narrators of *Orlando*, *A Maggot*, and *Dead Certainties* (like those of *I, Claudius*, *The Newton Letter*, and *Waterland*) are dramatized narrators, constructing their texts and interrupting their stories to reflect in the first person on historical periods, historiographic problems, and ethical issues. Though extradiegetic and heterodiegetic to the narratives they recount, these narrators participate in one level of story through their very acts of narrating, and (like *I, Claudius*'s, *Waterland*'s, and *The Newton Letter*'s intradiegetic and to varying degrees homodiegetic narrators), they too function as historian figures. In my terminology, I here follow Gérard Genette in his objections to the familiar division of narratives into the first and third persons; even a "third-person narrator" may sometimes use the grammatical first person and in any case writes or speaks from a particular perspective and position (244). Furthermore, as Shlomith Rimmon-Kenan explains, "Even when a narrative text presents passages of pure dialogue, manuscripts found in a bottle, or forgotten letters and diaries, there is in addition to the speakers or writers of this discourse a 'higher' narratorial authority responsible for 'quoting' the dialogue or 'transcribing' the written records" (88). Genette instead distinguishes between intradiegetic narrators who inhabit the same level or universe as do the stories they tell and extradiegetic narrators who exist on a level separate from (above and encompassing) those stories, and between homodiegetic narrators who take part in the stories they tell and heterodiegetic narrators who do not.

implications. This section and the dissertation as a whole thus explore the flexibility as well as the characteristic operation of the historian's text as a fictional form of historical engagement.

Yet simply by posing as a historian's text, *each* of these novels refers not just to knowledge of the past but to the production and consumption of disciplinary history: its conventions, procedures, and authority. In emphasizing their own narration and construction, these texts raise questions about the narration and construction of the historical past as 'we'—readers rather than professional producers of history—know it. Moreover, in times of intense debate regarding historical knowledge and its relationship to popular, fictional narratives, each text is further implicated by embedding the discipline in literary storytelling for an extra-disciplinary audience. This section considers some of the intersections of the narrative stance of the fictional historian's text and the historical-epistemological stances of disciplinary history, focusing on their use of historians to tell stories that are not quite histories, their presentation of historical conventions and concerns as one discourse among many, and the signalling and significance of their nonspecialist audiences.

Historians' texts speak in the voices of historians but at an angle to their discipline, in part by embedding the historians in fictions (or, in the case of *Dead Certainties*, embedding fictions in a historian's discourse). Whether a historian's text clearly criticizes a given historiographic tradition (as in *Orlando*), eagerly affirms and thereby claims historiographic authority (as in the Claudius novels), or demystifies without denouncing disciplinary history (as in *Dead Certainties*), its narrative stance necessarily creates critical distance between its own discourse and that of disciplinary

history. As fictions (in whole or in part), these texts are not bound by the conventions and procedures of disciplinary history, even as they mimic and perform them. This effect is underscored by another feature shared by all the texts: though they take on the role of the historian, they ventriloquize not disciplinary histories but the texts historians write when they do not or cannot produce conventional scholarly discourse.

In other words, these texts pose as *historians' texts* but not as actual or even fictional *proper histories*. The *Orlando* narrator cannot settle into writing either a historical biography or a novel. Claudius writes *I, Claudius* as the secret and unconventional history he cannot publish during his lifetime, the true supplement to his dull and censored public histories; on another level, too, Graves 'translates' this 'manuscript' instead of actually translating a historical account as he does in his later rendering of Suetonius's *Twelve Caesars*. *A Maggot's* narrator rarely narrates, offering readers something resembling an archive more than a history, and directs us to a question about the past that turns out to be impossible to answer: an unwritable history. The unnamed historian narrator of *The Newton Letter* cannot make himself finish his current book project, a historical biography of Isaac Newton, and produces a series of letters in its place; similarly, *Waterland's* narrator Tom Crick delivers a series of lectures to his students and readers instead of completing and offering us his *History of the Fens*. And the narrator of *Dead Certainties*, who seems to speak the voice of Schama himself, flagrantly fictionalizes and philosophizes rather than writing a traditional and conventionally-documented historical account of the death of General Wolfe or the trial of John Webster. These historians, like the fictions of their texts, operate at the contested borders between historical and other forms of discourse and understanding.

By dramatizing their historian narrators and drawing attention to the telling of their tales, historians' texts further distance themselves from twentieth-century historiography, even as this performance and emphasis are the techniques by which the texts engage professional history in the first place. Despite passionate disagreements over the nature and pursuit of historical knowledge (the subject of the following section), mainstream historical thought of at least the past two centuries exhibits certain continuities—particularly with respect to the relationship between the historian and the history he or she studies and writes. Enlightenment principles, including the clean distinction between knowing subject and object of knowledge, led to historiographic conventions that divide the historian's own historical context and personal commitments from the historical account. For instance, the typical structure of a historical monograph separates the historian's actions and interests (the methodological preface) from the narrated events; the narration and analysis of historical events avoids the first and second person pronouns, promoting a sense of factuality and direct reference rather than mediation through the historian, so that readers perceive only the truth about the past and a record of documentary support. While the conventions of disciplinary history work to erase the historian's tracks and voice, however, a fictional historian's text places that voice front and center.

The following chapters explore the many possible effects of this dissonant foregrounding. For instance, while the inadequacies of *Orlando's* narrator undermine the objectivity and inclusiveness of scholarly historical narrative as a whole, the failures of *Waterland's* narrator as a historian and history-teacher are ultimately attributed more to his personal indiscipline and confusion than to limitations inherent to disciplinary history

as a way of knowing. But by its basic narrative stance, each text is forced to deal in some way with the reality that histories are produced by historians, who are not only authorities on the past but also people. None of these narrators is omniscient; the extradiegetic narrators are just as emphatically limited in knowledge as the intradiegetic ones. The sense that our historian-narrator does not have access to the whole story foregrounds the ways in which readers' access to historical knowledge is often mediated through historians and the procedures and conventions of their discipline. Fictional historians' texts thus simultaneously connect to and distance themselves from historical discipline not only through the sheer fact of being novels—fictional and extra-disciplinary—spoken in historians' voices, but also through an emphasis on the historian's voice that runs counter to the discipline's conventions.

The texts further foreground history's discursive boundaries and conventions (also a focus of the historical-epistemological debates of their times) by juxtaposing multiple discourses. Each of the texts analysed in the following chapters borrows from a number of discourses, including various traditions within literature and history (and often other arenas as well): for instance, in *Orlando* we encounter fantasy, literary modernism, Victorian historical biography, and personal communication, while in *A Maggot* we meet with eighteenth-century literary conventions, journalism, chronicle, and legal and religious discourses. Placing historical discourse in the context of other discourses, these texts tend to denaturalize the voice of historical-epistemological authority.<sup>9</sup> Their mixing

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<sup>9</sup> What I describe here is often labeled interdiscursivity: the mixing of or exchanges between what Norman Fairclough describes as “different ways of structuring areas of knowledge and social practice” through language (3). The concept of interdiscursivity or, perhaps more transparently, discourse mixing can help us apprehend fictions' various

of multiple discourses suggests the constructedness of ‘proper’ historical writing by underscoring the multiplicity of available narrative conventions and the impact of style upon meaning. Even as it denaturalizes particular historical discourses, however, the discourse mixing of historians’ texts also allows them to construct their own epistemological authority and make claims regarding a world outside their fictions—the world where readers live, in which historians have authority to narrate the past. This tension between borrowing and undermining the authority of disciplinary history results from the duality inherent in a form that pretends to be but is not a familiar discourse. Irresolvable, the tension allows individual historians’ texts to emphasize one side of the coin (their faithful reproduction of historical knowledge and discourse, or their ironic caricature of it) but not to expel the other.

Because the texts use the liberties and popular audience of fiction to enter into debates about the possibility and nature of historical knowledge, their engagement in these debates takes place primarily in the arena of non-historian readers’ *reception* of authoritative historical statements (historians’ knowledge). Though they comment on and dramatize the production and transmission of historical knowledge, these novels do not teach a specialized audience of historians how to produce histories. Rather, they bridge a gap between historians’ practices and extra-disciplinary receivers of history—both as philosophers of history and literary theorists, and as novel-readers outside not only disciplinary history but also academic disciplines in general. This latter audience is often neglected by critics, but the texts nonetheless address a general audience of readers in a culture in which historians’ utterances have immense authority in shaping other people’s

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*claims to and forms of* aesthetic, moral, and epistemic authority, claims and forms that interact but are not necessarily homogenous or uniformly serious, effective, or explicit.



understanding of the past, and thus their present senses of all sorts of important things: selfhood, nationhood, time, and political priorities and possibilities, for instance. By addressing a popular audience *as* receivers of historians' authority, knowledge, and narratives, fictional historians' texts engage the periods' historical-epistemological unsteadiness from a significantly different angle from those taken by histories and philosophies of history—which generally assume an audience of specialists—and other historical and historiographic fictions—which generally raise questions about historical knowledge or existence in historical time rather than about the particular mediation of historical knowledge through disciplinary history and its practitioners.

By underscoring the role of historians as arbiters of historical knowledge, these novels distinguish between professional spectators in the archive and the rest of us in our armchairs or classroom desks. Despite variations in terms of period and degree of 'literary' as opposed to 'popular' aspiration, the novels discussed in the following chapters all imply a similar audience: we, the novels' readers, are positioned as receivers of historical knowledge who are predisposed to accept historians' discourse. The texts address this nonspecialist receiver of history in part through their broad and unmistakable references to the production of historical knowledge—their outright commentary on it, their obvious borrowing of historical discourses such as *A Maggot's* graphically reproduced chronicles, their use of historian narrators and often other historian characters as well. Instead of or (less often) in addition to intertextual relationships with particular Victorian or modernist histories, these texts invoke whole traditions of historical knowledge, writing, and teaching; they require of their readers little detailed knowledge of disciplinary history, assuming only the authority of a historian's position and then

working to shore up and/or break down that authority. In other words, though they interact intimately with their periods' historical-epistemological uncertainty, they are perfectly intelligible to a reader aware in broad strokes of the historical status quo but not of its relatively new unsteadiness within history, philosophy, and the arts. Historians' texts interpret and perform intellectual debates for a broad audience, mediating between historians' discourses and non-historian readers, and drawing attention to the ways in which historians mediate between the historical past and non-historians' perceptions of it.

This disjunction—between what the implied author knows and what the reader can be trusted to know—produces an air of didacticism in each of these texts, although the degree and nature of the didacticism vary in telling ways. In *Orlando*, for instance, the implied author is clearly distanced from the narrator through humor, and readers are invited to laugh at the narrator's didacticism (even as we are quite seriously taught lessons about historical knowledge and its exclusion of women). In *I, Claudius*, on the other hand, we may suspect the basically sympathetic yet imperfect Claudius, but the 'translator' who introduces and annotates Claudius's narrative is a transparently authoritative rather than a humorous figure. This distinction is in part a function of the authors' perceptions of their positions with regard to disciplinary history and scholarship more broadly: whereas Oxford-educated Graves wrote what he saw as completely serious factual histories in addition to his poems and novels (and expressed surprised displeasure when scholars ignored his arguments), Woolf was excluded from university education because of her sex and wrote self-consciously as an outsider. In *Orlando* as in her many reviews of histories and biographies, Woolf addresses non-specialist readers *as* a non-specialist reader herself; Graves claims greater authority and knowledge in relation to his

readers, and implies far less distance between himself and the organizing consciousness of *I, Claudius* than does Woolf in *Orlando*. In the first section of this dissertation, these two novels can thus help us approach the range of relationships with historical authority facilitated by the narrative stance of a fictional historian's text.

From their various positions and to their various ends, all of these texts mediate between disciplinary history and popular, extra-disciplinary audiences. They do so in part by foregrounding the mediation of historical knowledge through historians' discourse, involving themselves in highly contested shifts within the discipline. By performing the failures and the constructedness of historical knowledge, these fictions suggest that historical production is neither linear nor progressive. In this and other ways, they mirror terms of the historical-epistemological debates raging at the times of their publication. Their disciplinary context also foregrounds the nonlinearity of historical knowledge; the texts and these debates grapple with multiple models and with complex relationships between old and new. Furthermore, both the texts and the debates destabilize hard and fast oppositions of literature and history, of fiction and fact, without dismissing the potential of disciplinary historical knowledge. In the next section, I contextualize and begin to analyze the historical-epistemological moments of these historians' texts, focusing on the disciplinary instability that each text reflects and engages.

### **Challenges to 'Proper History,' 1918-39 and 1979-90**

The fictional historians' texts I discuss in the following chapters were produced in a culture in which epistemological authority resided largely in academic disciplines; certainly, historians and the texts they produce are often understood as having special

access to the past because of the procedures developed during nineteenth-century professionalization, when history became a ‘discipline’ rather than a hobby, a literary endeavor, or a form of moral reflection. Simply by approaching questions about historical knowledge through the framework of historians, these fictions suggest disciplinary history’s authority beyond its own specialists. On the other hand, they appear during two markedly unsteady moments in British historical thought, when the historiographic status quo came under particularly pointed attack both within the discipline and in the arts, philosophy, and public debate: the historical tradition of the Victorian gentleman-scholar came under increasingly powerful attack in the early twentieth century (and especially between the wars) by professionalized, research-oriented modernist history,<sup>10</sup> which itself came under attack by a skeptical postmodernist approach<sup>11</sup> in the final decades of the

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<sup>10</sup> The term *modernist history* describes an approach to historical research, writing, and pedagogy so entrenched that it is often used interchangeably with the phrase *proper history* (or, more skeptically but equally suggestively, *‘proper’ history*). Yet, as Michael Bentley points out, the term is little-defined: it describes a mode of knowing and telling the past that has become so obvious and common-sensical that it requires no explanation. The dating of this historical approach varies significantly as well: while Bentley’s study of modernist historiography covers the period from 1870 to 1970, Alan Munslow’s definition of modernism extends from the eighteenth-century Enlightenment to the present. Like Bentley, I use the term to refer to an outlook and methodology rather than a period; my understanding of its rise to prominence in Britain is outlined in this section.

<sup>11</sup> As in other areas of intellectual and artistic production, postmodernism in history is characterized in part by multiplicity and contradiction: there is no single, easily-defined “postmodernist history.” In broad strokes, and like postmodernist philosophies, the postmodernist challenge to modernist history critiques “realist epistemological [...] and ontological [...] dualisms: the separation of knower and known, observer and observed, subject and object, form and content, and fact [...] and value” (Munslow 189). Postmodernist historians, and historians influenced by without fully embracing postmodernist approaches, pay attention to the selection and rhetoric involved in historiography, rather than accepting the modernist view of writing as transparent reporting; they question the simplicity or stability of the relationship between narrative and past event. In its extreme form, postmodernism may reimagine history as “no longer an empirical enterprise but simply a variety of fiction that is wholly dependent upon self-

twentieth century.

These shifts were far from linear. During both periods, ‘proper,’ ‘obvious’ modes of knowing and telling the past became less obvious and less opaque to history’s various audiences, in response to changes in the political world, in the arts, in philosophy, and in history-writing. And these challenges did not simply overthrow or propose separate alternatives to but also interacted with and modified the natural way of knowing the past—‘proper history’ itself. The postmodernist critique of modernist history, for instance, both *includes* the return of certain elements of Victorian historiography (its emphasis on narrative, style, and non-specialist audiences) and *prompts* its own critics to champion the old-fashioned virtues of Victorian historiography (particularly its belief in progress and the excellence of England).<sup>12</sup> This section therefore charts a history of overlapping and competing modes of historical thought in which earlier constructions can lurk in the background or turn to extra-disciplinary venues, sometimes returning to vie with now-established traditions. It portrays nineteenth- and twentieth-century history-writing in Britain as a series of overlapping approaches that became more or less dominant in response to various events within disciplinary history and in British culture

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referentiality for its meaning” (189). But in practice, postmodernist history more often involves a shift from Truth to truths, a self-consciousness about perspective and methodology, and a loss of modernist confidence in the ultimate accessibility of the truth about the past.

<sup>12</sup> As Bentley argues, “the whigs did not die” (*Modernizing* 7): they may have “lost the commanding heights of the academic economy to hard-nosed professionals,” but they continued writing, moving “from glorious pronouncement [...] towards a form of distressed criticism, as though trying to remind the new culture that it owed something to the past’s legacies. [...] The view that historians needed to write about Life and ought to get one of their own in order to do so has survived into the era of the tele-don, as has the notion that books are for reading by a wide audience rather than for reference purposes among a self-sealing elite” (8). These ideas receive further attention in the final pages of this chapter.

and politics, rather than as a story of approaches following one after the other.

By understanding some of the many factors that shaped the resulting historical-epistemological clashes, we can better apprehend the relationship between fictional historians' texts and the authoritative though contested historians' discourse they harness. Significantly for my purposes, these two periods of historical-epistemic instability share intense concern over the role of narrative in shaping historians' and readers' understandings of the historical past, and over the proper audience of historical writing. These patterns clarify why fiction-writers might approach this academic discipline in the first place, and what it is about the discipline that opens it up to such engagements. History's intimate though sometimes rocky relationship with narrative opens the discipline to novelistic treatments and helps explain not only the popularity of realist historical fiction but also the existence of fictional historians' texts, in which 'historians' tell us stories. The broad appeal of the discipline's basic subject matter (even during periods when its practitioners tend toward highly technical and densely footnoted prose) also invites attention from novels aimed at a popular audience.

My story begins during the nineteenth century, when history (like so many other scholarly fields) began a process of professionalization that resulted in the specialized academic discipline we know today, with its considerable collection of conventions and institutions. The Victorian historical field grew out of (partly continuing, partly in opposition to) a variety of inherited traditions: Classical historiography, which constituted a branch of literature based primarily on eyewitness testimony and (in recounting older events) the accounts of earlier historians, and chiefly concerned with political events; medieval chronicles; the Renaissance's emerging secularism; and most

immediately Enlightenment historiography, with its emphasis on progress in historical development as well as in historical knowledge, its increasing concern with causality, and its split between detail-oriented, source-gathering “antiquarians” and narrative- and philosophy-oriented “historians.”<sup>13</sup> In European and American historiography, the shift to a professionalized, “scientific” history is usually dated to the contributions of German historian Leopold von Ranke, which spanned much of the nineteenth century. British historiography developed rather differently, however, because of a hesitant and uneven adoption of these new European methodologies and institutions. Here, the rise of modernist history—as a professionalized discipline requiring methodological training and committed to objective knowledge of the past based on critical evaluation of primary sources—was neither rapid nor steady.

In Britain, nineteenth-century historiography remained dominated by the gentleman scholar; the modernist model of a university-trained and university-employed professional historian prevailed over Victorian traditions only in the twentieth century. Furthermore, the field did not simply follow a slow but still linear path to a highly specialized, insular, professional discipline. Instead, a competing (and arguably more prominent) nineteenth-century development for history in Britain was the subject’s increasing public importance, as evidenced by the remarkable popularity of works by Thomas Babington Macaulay, Thomas Carlyle, James Anthony Froude, and J. R. Green. While from mid-century onwards some British historians (notably William Stubbs) turned critical attention to sources and bias, emphasizing accuracy and objectivity, a great

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<sup>13</sup> This synopsis does inexcusable violence to the diversity of historical thought and writing in these long periods, in an effort to provide a concise background for the historiographic issues most relevant to my argument. For more nuanced overviews of these periods, see Bentley (*Companion*) and Breisach.

deal of historical writing remained accessible to amateur writers and readers. A still-vigorous generalist, literary tradition of historiography coexisted with this emerging, more narrowly specialist, scientific one. The tradition labeled and critiqued in the interwar period as the “whig interpretation of history” was famously influential in the Victorian era; Herbert Butterfield introduced the term in 1931 to describe a historical approach tending “to emphasise certain principles of progress in the past and to produce a story which is the ratification if not the glorification of the present” (v).<sup>14</sup> These teleological grand narratives of (overwhelmingly English) history stand in obvious contrast to a nineteenth-century modernist drive to scientific history and its value of historical facts for their own sake. They represent a tradition of English history as stirring popular narrative—as literature rather than as science—that would be driven largely outside the profession during the twentieth century but remains influential and productive even today.

At Cambridge and Oxford, history joined the ranks of the university’s undergraduate fields in 1848 and 1850, respectively. But as T. W. Heyck argues, these programs were not designed to produce professional historians, for the simple reason that in mid-century England “there *was* no independent historical profession” (131); rather, the assumption remained that “it takes a good man rather than a specially trained expert to write good history” (131). In Heyck’s account, English history became

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<sup>14</sup> Butterfield’s thesis has been influential but also criticised. Some critics complain that *The Whig Interpretation of History* is unfairly critical of the Whig historians (because not just they but all writers bring their preconceptions and politics to the past; or because their work is judged to have other merits outshining the deficit of politics, presentism, and teleology; or in protest of the assumption that Whiggish faith in progress and parliamentary government is a bad thing). Others critique the volume as vague, contradictory, or unrealistic in its methodological advice. For critical approaches to *The Whig Interpretation*, see for instance Windschuttle and Patterson.



professionalized in the final decades of the nineteenth century, by 1900 adopting methods including specialization, the division of labor, and critical use of sources from the sciences—both directly and through the German historians already moving toward a scientific history (138). Yet, while an identifiable trend by the turn of the century, the shift in qualifications that would so alter mainstream historiography—from a historical scene dominated by the popular and colorful progress narratives of gentleman scholars to one dominated by seminar-trained researchers in the archives—was far from complete or uncontested.

The discipline's formative pedagogical approach—the seminar, in which small groups of students perform research and learn document analysis for archival work—was initiated by Ranke in the 1820s or 30s (Smith 105-6), but British historical culture was reluctant to change. Bonnie Smith points out that in the 1880s, when seminars were firmly established in history programs in the United States and continental Europe, English students were still travelling to Germany for such training (114). Similarly, the doctorate of philosophy became available in Germany (first at Friedrich Wilhelm University) around mid-century and in the US (beginning with Yale) in 1861—but England's universities debated the possibility of such a degree without actually offering it until the decade following the Great War (Kenyon 189). Differences in historical training had several significant implications: the requirements for teaching university-level history were necessarily different in England than in Germany and the US, the distinction between professional and amateur historians remained less absolute for a longer period, the place of detailed footnotes and archival work shifted only slowly from antiquarian amateurism to the center of the discipline, and narrow specialization imposed itself with

far less institutional force in the British nineteenth and early twentieth centuries than in the same period's Continental and American historical professions.

These tensions came to a head in the first part of the twentieth century. Especially in the period after the Great War, a divide between amateur and professional historian—emergent but weak at the turn of the century—became rigid and increasingly marginalized grand narratives and popular audiences. The English historical profession's major institutions shifted: while its London base into the twentieth century stood in contrast to the increasingly university-centered and systematized training of Continental and American history, this period markedly changed both the nature of the London institutions and the scarcity of university-affiliated institutions. For instance, while London's Royal Historical Society and *English Historical Review* were founded in 1868 and 1886, respectively, only in 1922 did an English university form “an equivalent society and an equivalent periodical”: the Cambridge Historical Society and its *Cambridge Historical Journal* (Kenyon 164). In the first quarter of the twentieth century, the Royal Historical Society itself became increasingly professionalized, shifting “from a semi-recreational society catering for cultivated amateurs with a spare-time interest in history to a fully academic organization confined to university staff and those others who could provide evidence of professional skills by publication” (195). The interwar period was characterized not by a straightforward shift to professionalized history, however, but by many forms of change and uncertainty with regard to historical knowledge—both within and outside the discipline.

The war brought to a head multiple strains of epistemological skepticism and methodological change that had begun to impact pre-war thought, as Nietzschean

questioning and a drive toward science-like factuality became simultaneously influential. If, as Butterfield argues, historians had previously been “the very model of the 19th century gentleman” (3-4), perceptions of traditional history were bound to be affected by many people’s belief that Victorian gentlemen and their values had needlessly condemned young men to be maimed and killed. And as Hayden White recounts, the war, which “seemed to confirm what Nietzsche had maintained two generations earlier,” undermined the subject’s nineteenth-century claims to authority: “History, which was supposed to provide some sort of training for life, [...] had done little to prepare men for the coming of the war” (36). For many modern artists, thus, history seemed “not only a substantive burden imposed upon the present by the past in the form of outmoded institutions, ideas, and values, but also *the way of looking at the world* which gives to those outmoded forms their specious authority” (White 39).<sup>15</sup> Here, White emphasizes the sense of doubt that followed the war, pointing to modernist literary representations of historians as “the extreme example of repressed sensibility” (31). Alongside these spiritually-dead or deadly boring historian figures, though, we must also acknowledge the very different approach of novels as otherwise diverse as *Orlando* and *I, Claudius*. As their treatments of their historian narrators demonstrate, even fictions engaged with

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<sup>15</sup> Longenbach offers evidence for this view in the modernists’ own words, though he complicates an understanding of postwar modernism as simply anti-historicist. After experiencing the war, for instance, Ford Madox Hueffer wrote: “If, before the war, one had any function it was that of historian. Basing, as it were, one’s morality on the Europe of Charlemagne as modified by the Europe of Napoleon. I once had something to go upon. One could approach with composure the Lex Allemannica, the Feudal System, problems of Aerial Flight, or the price of wheat or the relations of the sexes. But now, it seems to me, we have no method to approach any of these problems” (qtd. in Longenbach 9); Wyndham Lewis saw the opposition to Germany as a strike against “the interference of the past” and continues, “Europe to-day dislikes history. It is not one of her subjects. The past is a murderous drug [...]” (qtd. in Longenbach 9).

historical-epistemological questions could still posit enormous authority in disciplinary history's representations of the past. Non-historians, as artists and as readers of histories, responded diversely to the interwar uncertainty of history's capacity and purpose.

For historians, too, the war combined with other changes to alter historical thought. As Bentley summarizes, "The empire shaken in 1902, the lives lost after 1914, the transformed culture after 1918, the sheer acceleration of ideas of time and space, the leap forward in technology" all posed a challenge to established historical conventions (*Modernizing* 15). In Smith's transnational view of the fin-de-siècle through inter-war years, disciplinary history "seemed to pull in multiple directions, moved less by consensus than by controversy" (213); these strains were comparatively limited in British historiography until the interwar period when, most obviously, a Victorian faith in the progress of civilization stood in stark contrast to the horrors of trench warfare.

Longenbach argues that, unlike their German counterparts, English historians "remained relatively uninterested in the philosophical speculation about the nature of history" until the war "gave a more concrete reality to what had previously been purely theoretical problems," prompting British historians, philosophers, and artists to rethink the values and procedures through which we know the past. Cultural, political, and intellectual events and developments joined together in interwar Britain to produce a wildly varied landscape for historical writing and its reception.

In the 1930s, historians and philosophers such as Carl Becker, Charles Beard, R. G. Collingwood, and Benedetto Croce<sup>16</sup> placed the very possibility of objective history-writing under question (Munslow 165) at the same time as many historians threw

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<sup>16</sup> This list suggests the international character of antipositivist thought between the wars; Becker and Beard were American, Collingwood British, and Croce Italian.

themselves into an emphatically modern and scientific pursuit of historical facts for historical facts' sake. Longenbach correctly notes that twentieth-century historiography questioned "the presuppositions about the nature of historical knowledge that make the construction of any sort of teleological or even linear history possible" (6). Yet Bentley is also accurate in reminding us *both* that most British historians "continued to affirm the whig idea of progress" (*Modernizing* 81) *and* that many turned in this period from a Victorian legacy toward a history "drained of its colour and picturesqueness [...]" but charged with a new sense of reality and legitimated by procedures quite as rigorous as those found at the Cavendish Laboratory" (15). Furthermore, as I argue with regard to Virginia Woolf in chapter two, many extra-disciplinary readers and writers of history struggled to choose between or reconcile, on one hand, a Victorian historiographic inheritance and, on the other, the philosophical-artistic flight from history associated with Friedrich Nietzsche's 1874 essay "The Use and Abuse of History" and James Joyce's description of history, in the mouth of Stephen Dedalus, as "a nightmare from which I am trying to awake" (34). Compared even to the significant methodological disagreements of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, the interwar period of British historical thought and of non-historians' (especially artists' and philosophers') perceptions of history were beset by uncertainty and contradiction.

Both Victorian and modernist approaches to history survived the intense epistemological doubt of the early twentieth century and of its two world wars. The Victorian tradition of colorful narrative histories appealing to non-specialist readers persevered despite modernist disdain for it. Indeed, dissonance between scientific historians and (often amateur) historians of sweeping narratives continued throughout the

1940s, '50s, and '60s, alongside quite meaningful divergences amongst various modernist schools of history. Yet modernist history as a general approach to historical research, writing, and teaching had become so entrenched as to seem transparent—so much so that “modernist history” and “proper history” would soon be (and still are) used as interchangeable terms. Even debates between two university historians from deeply opposed ideological or methodological perspectives would ‘obviously’ operate within modernist notions of evidence—critically-evaluated archival materials and, in an ancillary role, ‘secondary’ sources—and qualifications—postgraduate training, academic publication, and a university post. Modernism’s obviousness would be shaken, though its methodology has yet to be fundamentally unsettled, in the 1970s, '80s, and '90s of postmodernist theory and Thatcherite politics.

The second section of this dissertation addresses texts produced during Margaret Thatcher’s tenure as Prime Minister: *The Newton Letter*, *Waterland*, *A Maggot*, and *Dead Certainties*. As chapter four describes in greater detail, these decades were home to a number of highly divisive and related conflicts over historical knowledge within British politics, popular culture, art, philosophy, and disciplinary history—debates characterized by a deep sense of the meaningfulness and power of the past, and simultaneously a deep doubt regarding the accessibility and nature of historical truth. At the same time as the heritage movement and its opponents rose in prominence, ‘The Great History Debate’ questioned the proper nature and purpose of history in the schools, and postmodernist thought extended its reach beyond philosophy and literary studies to critique the widely-accepted objectivity of modernist history. Margaret Thatcher’s desire to return to Victorian values expressed itself in part through a historical imagination that was itself in

many ways Victorian: a confident narrative approach emphasizing political history, the greatness of Great Britain, and (somewhat paradoxically, given the narrative's nostalgia) progress. Her government passed the National Heritage Acts of 1980 and 1983 and presided over the re-evaluation of school history, with Thatcher herself promoting a kings-and-queens version of history quite foreign to modernist—let alone postmodernist—historical practices (Phillips 51). As in the interwar period, a whole collection of only loosely-connected scholarly, political, and artistic developments collaborated in Thatcherite Britain to produce a period of intra- and extra-disciplinary questioning about the possibility and proper methodology of historical knowledge.

In addition to this shared uncertainty and multiplicity, the debates of the Thatcherite period echo those of the interwar period in their content: while postmodernist challenges to historiography fundamentally challenged the modernist model, the Thatcherite period was also a time when nineteenth-century historical traditions retained and even regained meaningful cultural authority, particularly for an extra-disciplinary audience. As Bentley claims, “the postmodern world has in some ways encouraged the rubber ball to resume its bouncing in the direction of history as meaning, story-telling, communicating with a wide general audience” (*Modernizing* 115), even as postmodernist (far more fundamentally than modernist) history has discredited singular and teleological narratives “of the kind that the Victorian whigs had offered” (115). In both the interwar and Thatcherite periods, and indeed to varying degrees throughout the twentieth century and into the twenty-first, we find passionate defenses of and attacks upon Victorian historical traditions and particularly the practice of history as popular, literary narrative.

Cutting across the various historiographic and historical-pedagogical debates of

the later period—the arguments over school history, the influence of postmodernist philosophy and literary theory, and popular representations of the English past as heritage in political rhetoric, films, museums, and other media—was this dual desire for and suspicion of historical narratives, of stories as a way we can know and tell the past. Bentley associates the unsettling of modernism’s hegemony in the 1970s and 1980s with a desire to reach non-specialist audiences through readable (or, increasingly, watchable) narratives:

Historians began to seek new audiences—the ones that modernism had so significantly failed to touch. [This shift] involved historians from a widening background of experience who worked in institutions quite different from the ones modernists had known. It gave rise to new journals and popular magazines and television programmes [...]. Among the younger historians now known to the public for their skills in communication we detect nothing so much as a new whiggery. Stories have returned, footnotes have thinned or disappeared, history has relocated itself as a literary and visual medium. (*Modernizing* 220-1)

In the later period’s dissonance over the role of story in history, we can hear echoes of the emerging modernist historians’ interwar complaints about their whig predecessors, and of (largely amateur) narrative historians’ and biographers’ complaints about the modernists who had soon marginalized storytelling and interest in readers’ pleasure.<sup>17</sup> And although Bentley warns against attributing modernism’s decreasing authority to something “so trite (and often meaningless) as the arrival of ‘postmodernism’” (220), postmodernist philosophy has prompted many historians to acute awareness of the role of narrative in

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<sup>17</sup> As Heyck recounts, “The tradition of ‘amateur’ historical writing directed at a general audience did not die out; indeed, it has remained more vital in England than elsewhere in modern Europe or America. Nevertheless, the new professional history had become more important in volume and intellectual authority than the older Victorian style. [...] By their research orientation and their sense of their legitimate audience, the professional historians cut themselves off from the general reading public to a remarkable degree. This meant that the professional historians gave up the position of immense public esteem held by earlier Victorian historians” (150).



historical knowledge, and to experiments with narrative form.

By rejecting the modernist view of historical knowledge as progressive and potentially exhaustive, postmodernist philosophers of history including White, Michel de Certeau, and Michel Foucault support an anti-stadialist understanding of history's history such as the one I offer here.<sup>18</sup> Through gestures of intellectual inheritance, they also *perform* the layered and nonlinear history of historical thought. Foucault's 1971 essay "Nietzsche, Genealogy, and History," for instance, troubles a progress narrative of historical knowledge on multiple levels: most obviously, it attacks the very notion of progress and knowledge. But it also stands as evidence for a nonlinear interpretation of history's history, through its own twentieth-century endorsement of Nietzsche's nineteenth-century position. Foucault's essay thus reminds us that one strain of historical-epistemological doubt in late-nineteenth-century Europe (and early-twentieth-century Britain) bears striking resemblance to the later, postmodernist, critique; indeed, Nietzsche's "On the Use and Abuse of History" echoes through many postmodernist reflections on history. The shared critique reminds us that the confident modernist move from colorful Grand Narrative to scientific knowledge of the past occurred alongside a fundamental suspicion of knowledge, objectivity, and reason.

It also reveals that modernist historians adopted some of the Victorian historians' most basic assumptions, even as they saw themselves as breaking definitively from their

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<sup>18</sup> My account follows the postmodernists' emphasis on history's discursive conventions and changing epistemological assumptions, joining them in viewing historical inquiry and other forms of knowledge as constructed rather than given. In thus privileging certain postmodernist insights, I do not mean to posit this approach to historical knowledge as somehow outside or above the discipline's history. Rather, this dissertation historicizes postmodernist as well as Victorian and modernist historical traditions as objects of inquiry, in terms of their representation within and shaping of fictional historians' texts.

predecessors' way of knowing the past. Foucault describes "traditional history" or "[t]he historian's history" (152) as a teleological approach premised upon "objectivity, the accuracy of facts, and the permanence of the past" (158)—a critique that encompasses not just a specific tradition within historiography but centuries of competing traditions. Despite their marked differences, both Victorian Grand Narratives and the modernist stance share those Enlightenment assumptions; Foucault's critique—and the very fact that he can seamlessly borrow it from someone writing a century earlier—underscores these traditions' shared faith in objectivity and progress. Despite his privileging of discontinuity, Foucault's essay thus presents historical knowledge as a series of overlapping and connected approaches. Similarly, the essay suggests that the postmodernist turn against modernism *draws on* modernist thought: modernism's will to knowledge threatens the assumptions of modernism. It is history's own methodology that can dismantle traditional history and lead us to a history of accident, rupture, and domination. Historical thought, after all, has the potential to resituate "within a process of development everything considered immortal in man" (153), *including* premises vital to mainstream nineteenth- and twentieth-century history alike: the unified self, reason, objectivity, temporality.<sup>19</sup> These concepts came under question during both the inter-war and the Thatcherite periods, as those mainstream historical approaches became less stable and transparent.

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<sup>19</sup> Foucault claims that a history of reason and knowledge—including, presumably, a history of disciplinary history—will show "that it was born in an altogether 'reasonable' fashion—from chance; devotion to truth and the precision of scientific methods arose from the passion of scholars, their reciprocal hatred, their fanatical and unending discussions, and their spirit of competition—the personal conflicts that slowly forged the weapons of reason" (142). While my view of scholarship is not quite so violent, this perception is played out (in a more nuanced, concrete, and even-handed fashion) in Smith's *The Gender of History*, which informs chapter five.

Yet as Bentley's comments also suggest, while the historical-epistemological debates of the early and late twentieth century shared concerns, they were far from identical—in part because they played out in significantly different arenas. Passionate statements of doubt regarding and energetic disagreements over historical knowledge and methodology were, in the 1920s and '30s, largely confined to a scholarly or artistic elite and little-present in popular media such as newspapers. In contrast, the contestations of the 1970s, '80s, and '90s raged in newspapers and magazines as well as in scholarly journals and books within disciplinary history, education, philosophy, and literary studies. The shift to a broader public debate resulted in large part from the expansion of higher education and the explosion of the mass media between the two periods.

The history of the British Broadcasting Corporation illustrates the latter trend as an important (though far from the sole relevant) example. Formed in 1922,<sup>20</sup> the BBC rapidly expanded its radio broadcasting to nearly-national coverage during the following four years. It began experimental television broadcasts in 1929 and launched the BBC Television Service<sup>21</sup> in 1932, again rapidly expanding from a tiny broadcast area to reach approximately twenty thousand homes by the beginning of the Second World War—and then approximately twenty *million* viewers<sup>22</sup> for the 1953 coronation of Queen Elizabeth II (“Sound”). In 1964 the BBC launched its second television station, BBC2, in a first

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<sup>20</sup> As the British Broadcasting Company; it became the British Broadcasting Corporation in 1927.

<sup>21</sup> The station was known as the BBC Television Service until 1960, when it became BBC tv; upon the 1964 launch of BBC2 the station was renamed BBC1.

<sup>22</sup> While this figure dwarfs the number of television sets owned in Britain at the time (because many people gathered to view the broadcast at neighbors' homes or in public places), it illustrates the rise of television as a popular medium; indeed, the experience prompted many people to purchase television sets.

step toward the niche programming that would make possible today's television documentaries and specialized stations—including, of course, BBC History. The ever-expanding mass media and its increasing attention to niche publishing and broadcasting also created new venues for the distribution of historical narratives to a general audience. *History Today* (which now describes itself as “the world’s premier, and probably the oldest, history magazine” [“About”]) was launched in 1951, for example, and historian A. J. P. Taylor gave the first of his popular televised lectures in 1957 (Collini 380-1). The history of the BBC also offers glimpses of the expansion of the British university system: in 1971, BBC radio and television stations began broadcasting Open University programs, initiated by a Labour government seeking to democratize already-rapidly-expanding higher education—and by 1980, 70,000 students were enrolled (“History”). More likely to be university-educated and therefore to view themselves as qualified to opine about scholarly matters, with access to a far more diversified mass media whose specialized organs covered historical debates, and increasingly connected to political controversies and decisions through radio and television coverage, a larger segment of the British population participated in the historical-epistemological contention of the Thatcherite period than in its interwar forebear.

The two sections of this dissertation thus play out in similar-but-different contexts. They engage disciplinary history at moments when doubt leads to acute awareness of a particular historical form's constructedness and contingency, and to attempts to produce either a more transparent form or a more self-consciously and honestly constructed one. Yet in addressing an audience outside the discipline, these texts are significantly impacted by the shifting relationship between professional historians and

popular audiences. The history of British history, *especially* from the perspective of an extra-disciplinary audience, is far from stadial or teleological: the following chapters work to account for echoes and distinctions between these two periods, coexisting strains within each period, and the unresolved and perhaps irresolvable tensions that drive both the historical-epistemological debates and the fictional narratives analyzed here. During periods of disciplinary instability, these historians' texts harness points of contact between the discourse of professional historians and the knowledge and values of non-historian readers. Through a shared narrative stance, they promote significantly varying ends, identifying different points of contact through their different assessments both of their readers' competence and of the various challenges to historical authority.

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## CHAPTER TWO

### Acts of Inheritance:

#### Virginia Woolf, *Orlando*, and the Impossible Legacy of Victorian Historiography

“The complete Insider”—I have just coined this term to express my feelings toward George Trevelyan; who has just been made Master of Trinity: whose history of England I began after tea [...]. Insiders write a colourless English. They are turned out by the University machine. I respect them. Father was one variety. I don't love them. I don't savour them. Insiders are the glory of the 19th century. They do a great service like Roman roads. But they avoid the forests & the will o the wisps.

- *The Diary of Virginia Woolf* (333)

As the preceding chapter establishes, the history of the British historical profession troubles simple periodization or a linear narrative of scholarly progress; multiple methodologies and epistemologies have overlapped and interacted. And even more markedly than its professional cousin, popular British history has followed many crossing and sometimes recursive paths. These categories provide a necessary background for understanding Virginia Woolf's engagements with historical knowledge and its authority—yet how inadequate they prove even in the face of a snippet from her diary. In the handful of sentences from a 1940 entry that serve as this chapter's epigraph, Woolf describes a historical-epistemological inheritance that obeys the laws not only of chronology but of sex and privilege: G. M. Trevelyan was only six years older than Woolf herself, and his *History of England* was published not in the nineteenth century but in 1926, but Woolf nonetheless aligns him with her father rather than with herself. These Cambridge-educated men are insiders, Romans, “the glory of the 19th century,”



regardless of dates. And even in pointing out their failings, Woolf acknowledges their “great service,” their practical and lasting contribution.

In turning to Woolf’s works, the present chapter offers an extended example of the nonlinearity of historical knowledge through the writings of a woman who occupied a peculiar space between insider and outsider, between professional and amateur<sup>23</sup>—and who insisted on the higher value of amateurism and outsider perspectives without neglecting the power of the insiders, their credentials, and their facts. It enriches and complicates the introduction’s preliminary sketch of the historiographic terrain traversed by literary texts, by considering an author whose aesthetics and politics blur lines: between what I have termed Victorian and modernist history, for instance, and between novelistic and historical representations of the past. The methodological shifts of the late Victorian and especially modernist periods within the British historical field are far less important from Woolf’s perspective than certain *continuities* across these periods’ mainstream historical approaches: continuities of sexism, and of attention to external facts at the expense of internal experiences. In one sense, Trevelyan soon became an outsider to the mainstream of his discipline, spending a long and productive twentieth-

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<sup>23</sup> The distinction between amateur and professional is important to Woolf and plays a role in *Orlando*. Patrick Collier traces how male modernists perpetuated the traditional association of amateurism, commercialism, and prostitution—the devaluing of amateurism and its gendering as feminine—and presents, in contrast, Woolf’s valuing of amateurism, disgust with professionalism and association of *it* with commercialism. Also usefully, he explains that “For Woolf, *professional* can connote being certified by university credentialing to explain and critique literature; it can also attach to popular critics such as Arnold Bennett, who adopted a declamatory, authoritative, professorial tone even though they lacked a university education. Professionalism is above all a state of mind marked by an excessive emphasis on income, authority, or reputation. The professional pose lends what Woolf saw as a specious authority to the critics and professors who mediate between the artist and the audience [...]” (378). Yet Woolf herself was, of course, a professional writer.

century career writing histories in the Victorian tradition; many of his modernist colleagues reviled as whiggish and old-fashioned this popular, literary style that privileged imagination and engagement over scientific objectivity. And yet he remained an insider from Woolf's extra-disciplinary and female perspective, backed as he was by the enormous public authority of Victorian historiography, a Cambridge education, and a university post. In contrast, as she so often points out, Woolf was an outsider as a woman, excluded from historical authority and allowed little formal education—despite her position as a member of an economic and cultural elite.

The diary entry was not the first time Woolf used Trevelyan to represent university historians and their limiting insider perspective; his figure also helps her plot out mixed desire for and repulsion from insider status in her 1929 *A Room of One's Own*.<sup>24</sup> Here, Woolf critiques Trevelyan's *History of England*—standing in for scholarly history in general—for its near-total omission of women: "Occasionally an individual woman is mentioned, an Elizabeth, or a Mary; a queen or a great lady. But by no possible means could middle-class women with nothing but brains and character at their command have taken part in any one of the great movements which, brought together, constitute the historian's view of the past" (2115). Rather than simply rejecting "the historian's view of the past" for that of the novelist, anthropologist, or mythographer, however, Woolf's narrator makes a strangely roundabout proposal to the women of Newnham and Girton Colleges:

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<sup>24</sup> For more on Woolf's uses of Trevelyan, see Karin Westman's reading of "Friendships Gallery" as parody of his historical approach ("First Orlando" 47-9) and Hotho-Jackson's reading of Trevelyan as an example of continuity between nineteenth- and twentieth-century historiography: a continuity she sees as vying with literary-modernist rupture in Woolf (294-5).

It would be ambitious beyond my daring, I thought, looking about the shelves for books that were not there, to suggest to the students of those famous colleges that they should rewrite history, though I own that it often seems a little queer as it is, unreal, lop-sided; but why should they not add a supplement to history, calling it, of course, by some inconspicuous name so that women might figure there with out impropriety? (2115)

The ironic modesty of this passage—its assurances that the narrator would never dream of trodding upon the male historians’ toes or presume to call researched narratives of women’s past lives “history”—refuses to be taken seriously. At the same time, however, it voices sentiments that come up again and again in Woolf’s writings: its search for some form of history-but-not-quite, its uncertainty regarding whether “unreal, lop-sided” history is even salvageable, its connection between women’s exclusion from historical knowledge as its subjects and women’s exclusion from historical knowledge as its producers and recorders. Such a tone may prove troubling in its slipperiness, short on practical answers. But, as I claim in this chapter, slipperiness and ambivalence lie at the heart of Woolf’s struggles with a historiographic inheritance that both drew and repelled her.

This chapter thus takes as its anchor Woolf’s *least* forthright and serious treatment of historiography and its shortcomings, her 1928 novel/biography *Orlando*. Like all the historians’ texts discussed in the introductory chapter and analyzed in greater detail in the chapters to follow, this particular text has an illuminating habit of pointing readers outside itself, in this case to Woolf’s other writings and extratextual life as well as to the discourses of historical authority. *Orlando*’s echoes of earlier texts, and later texts’ echoes of *Orlando* in turn, prompt readers to writings spanning Woolf’s career and across genres. As a multifaceted lens, it makes visible the deep-seated and ultimately irresolvable nature of Woolf’s ambivalence toward various historical traditions. It offers a

view of Woolf stuck in the gap between a Victorian faith in factuality and transparency, and a literary-modernist abandonment of documented for mystical, imagined, or felt history—not so much in believing in both, but in repeatedly concluding that each is impossible and unfaithful to past lives, and then trying again to accept one, both, or a combination of the two.

Woolf's ongoing struggle with her Victorian historical inheritance is also voiced tellingly in *Orlando* through a fascinatingly indefinite use of the historian's text form. Its narrator shifts amongst nineteenth-century, masculinist modes of historiography, biography, and novel-writing without ever settling into one—or even into a masculine stance. Through this mixing of discourses, the text performatively echoes that odd position between insider and outsider famously described in *A Room of One's Own*: “if one is a woman one is often surprised by a sudden splitting off of consciousness, say in walking down Whitehall, when from being the natural inheritor of that civilisation, she becomes, on the contrary, outside of it, alien and critical. Clearly the mind is always altering its focus, and bringing the world into different perspectives” (2142).<sup>25</sup> *Orlando's*

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<sup>25</sup> The potential problems of being a female “inheritor” surface in *Orlando* on multiple levels. At the end of his/her ‘biography,’ Orlando remains in “undisturbed possession of her titles, her house, and her estate; though costly, the lawsuits against her fail to unsettle her inheritance and leave her “infinitely noble” (255), but the woman on whom Orlando is based had less good fortune. Knole, the country estate where Vita Sackville-West was born in 1892, was entailed to the male heirs to the Sackville title; when Sackville-West's father died in 1928, her cousin thus inherited her home. This double-exposure image of a woman's inheritance—Orlando's innate and legally recognized right to both title and estate, simultaneously covering and drawing attention to Sackville-West's ineligibility for both—neatly signals the interactions amongst gender, genre, and inheritance so evident in *Orlando* and across Woolf's writings. And like Sackville-West, Woolf too was treated as ineligible for a large part of what she seems to have seen as her rightful inheritance—not a house like Sackville-West's beloved Knole, but the education and the resulting intellectual (and specifically historical) authority her father and brothers were offered as a matter of course.

inconsistent narrative stance acts out women's and Woolf's mixed blessing and curse, this critical multiplicity of perspective that Orlando him/herself experiences dramatically when the male character suddenly becomes a woman. Never straightforward and always joking, this text flickers with but does not stabilize a shorthand caricature of Victorian historiography to be dismissed as absurdly outdated, hypocritical, and inadequate to historical reality. Instead, its narrative slipperiness and humor accommodate ambivalence: in refusing to be serious or logical—in refusing to limit itself to a single perspective—*Orlando* need not maintain a consistent image of the Victorians or their approach to the past.

Pointing outside itself to countless texts, figures, and ideas, *Orlando* can help us understand Woolf's long engagement with historical knowledge; in turn, it can best be understood in this context where it places itself through intertextuality and discourse mixing, through echoes and imitations. This chapter thus begins with the multiplicity of Woolf's connections to the production of history, exploring the complexity of her historiographic inheritance. I then explore the ambivalence toward historiography Woolf expresses across her writing career. From her earliest writings into her final novel, this chapter asserts, Woolf both shares the Victorians' desire for historical narrative and knowledge, and undercuts the idea that we can seek such knowledge in a reasonable or genuinely illuminative way. Next, I discuss Woolf's stereotyped representations of the Victorian historian, as well as her representations—often deeply skeptical—of such caricaturing and periodization.

The chapter's final sections focus more tightly on *Orlando*. There, I address the shifting relationships of the *Orlando* narrator with disciplinary history and with its

masculine perspective, and then examine the impact of irony and joking on the text's use of Victorian historical authority. Finally, I make the case that these narrative techniques—however amusing—contribute significantly to *Orlando*'s capacity to express something serious: a complex relationship with historiography as a sexist way of knowing (which has so excluded and controlled women) and simultaneously as a vital tool for women's entry into public meaning and meaningful action. This text does not launch a total rejection of historiography; indeed, it recounts literary history in a social context,<sup>26</sup> and writes (in its own way) centuries of Vita Sackville-West's family history. Nor does it completely reject biography; though far from a traditional biography, it attempts to write a woman's life and claims a kind of truth that is not exclusively novelistic. Instead, *Orlando* performs uncertainty about the relationship between historical fact and the imagination or fantasy, through a narrator who takes on a range of not-always-distinguishable poses and who breaks down the traditional boundaries of Victorian historiography and biography—even as he or she sometimes facilitates the mocking rejection of those forms' authoritative personae. It seems to me that this awkward slipperiness is, if not the firmest, the best ground from which to view the immediacy and messiness of early-twentieth-century relationships with Victorian historiography.

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<sup>26</sup>Andrew McNeillie asserts that Woolf "shared with [Leslie] Stephen a common perspective upon literature as a commodity that is socially and historically conditioned, despite her belief in 'purity' and autonomy. It is a befitting irony that her extraordinary (and to some exasperating) jeu d'esprit *Orlando* [...] itself expresses a view of English literature that is as *historical* and *social* as Stephen could have wished, for all the gendering of his critical values" (*Essays* IV:xii).

## A Troublesome Inheritance

The Victorians and their approach to history remained influential throughout the twentieth century, in various forms and for various audiences, as this dissertation's introduction suggests. But who made 'the Victorians,' the monolithic intellectual and cultural force so easy for us to assume? Many scholars of the nineteenth century point to the literary modernists, and especially to the Bloomsbury group, as responsible for late twentieth- and early twenty-first-century oversimplifications and misrepresentations of Victorian culture, art, scholarship, and life.<sup>27</sup> Christopher Herbert follows this trajectory when he asserts that the particular "alienation" of late-twentieth-century thought from its Victorian inheritance is built upon "a longstanding cultural mythology": even "the late-Victorian and Edwardian years are full of testimonies to a supposed transformation of consciousness sharply separating the Victorian age from the one that comes after" (33). His second example is the one that appears most dependably in analyses of this abrupt turn: "When Virginia Woolf declares from the vantage point of 1924 that 'In or about December, 1910, human character changed,' [...] she offers another version of the same insistent myth of a radical discontinuity between the Victorians and us folk of the twentieth century" (33). Certainly Woolf participates in Bloomsbury's characterization of the Victorian as everything the modern is not—stuffy, stable, certain. And yet, when we

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<sup>27</sup> Simon Joyce discusses this habit of pointing to the Bloomsbury group: "Arguably theirs is a view that set the terms for thinking about the nineteenth century in the twentieth" (631). He cites John McGowan and Matthew Sweet as scholars of the Victorian who see Bloomsbury as central in this way. According to McGowan, "Although their period was the modern for Mill, Carlyle, and Ruskin, the Victorian is now quintessentially the past, the period against which we gauge our own modernness. The Bloomsbury Group played a large role in this transformation of the Victorian into the nonmodern," especially in their ideas about sexuality (11); Sweet blames the group for "grotesque caricatures and misreadings of the period" (Joyce 631; see Sweet xv-xvii).

examine Woolf's representations of Victorian historical thought—so central to twentieth-century impressions of the period—we are faced not with simple caricature and rejection but instead with thoroughgoing changeability and ambivalence throughout her writing career.

Taking *Orlando* and many of Woolf's essays and reviews seriously, even in their jokes, means taking Victorian historical authority seriously. Relatively little literary criticism treats literary-modernist understandings and uses of history as an intellectual pursuit; when James Joyce's Stephen Dedalus calls history "a nightmare from which I am trying to awake" (34), he is often taken as representative of a modernism that perceives the past as an existential burden.<sup>28</sup> Woolf, on the other hand, frequently depicts history not as a crushing weight but as a topic (the past) and mode (archival research and historiography) of scholarly inquiry. As Sabine Hotho-Jackson explains, while Woolf's historical thought participates in the contemporary crisis of liberalism and positivism, she does not fit tidily with "philosophically minded authors like Pound, Yeats, Eliot, who did not write about the historian's plight or about the past, but about [...] history as metahistory"—as "fate, nightmare, dilemma, apocalypse" (295). Hotho-Jackson argues instead that Woolf's writings display both "[t]he modern view of history/reality [as] a complex network of the subjective and the objective, an osmosis of past and present" and "a traditional concept of history as story and particularly as English story" (296).

Furthermore, I argue here, Woolf *never* fully abandoned or accepted the authority of that

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<sup>28</sup> Particularly interesting, though, are: Longenbach on T. S. Eliot and Ezra Pound as "historical poets"; and Louise Blakeney Williams on cyclic views of history in Pound, W.B. Yeats, Ford Madox Ford, T.E. Hulme, and D.H. Lawrence, who (she argues) were all either formulating or further invested themselves in such views during the 1920s and '30s.



familiar Victorian approach to history: rather, she participated in the interrogation of historical epistemology that occurred both within and outside disciplinary history at the time of her writing career.

Even the literary modernists Hotho-Jackson describes as “philosophically minded” were not detached from a Victorian tradition of historical inquiry. Instead, James Longenbach perceives a great deal of continuity from the Victorians’ “preoccupation with the past” to that of Ezra Pound in *The Cantos* and T. S. Eliot in *The Waste Land* (5). For Longenbach, it is the modernists’ disbelief in linear progress or decline that distinguishes their historical approach from “a simple elaboration of their Victorian inheritance” (5). More significantly for my purposes, though, I would add that these poets make *historians* irrelevant by removing both factuality and mediation from the project of knowing the past, which “becomes a mystical project” (Longenbach 18). For instance, Longenbach argues, “The fact that he represents his historical sense with the tale of Isis gathering the limbs of Osiris or Odysseus reviving the ghost of Tiresias (rather than, say, George Eliot’s Mr. Casaubon searching for the key to all mythologies) reveals the intensity with which Pound approached the past” (19). But in using the voice of a seer rather than a researcher, Pound also approaches historical knowledge in a way that discards disciplinary history as beside the point. Similarly, in *The Waste Land* we have a palimpsestic history accessible to a priest and prophet, *not* a narrative history available to objective reflection (Longenbach 27).

“The heart of Anglo-American literary modernism,” claims Longenbach, “may be found in Pound’s and Eliot’s attempts to negotiate between several conflicting types of historicism, and discover a vitalizing attitude toward history” (12). Without attempting to

(re)locate the center of modernism, however, this chapter insists that Woolf's different negotiation has a great deal to show us about writing and reading the legacy of Victorian historical knowledge in twentieth-century Britain. Like Eliot, Woolf distrusted the ideal of historiography by which the gathering of enough facts would eventually lead to an accurate, objective view of the past—an ideal shared by mainstream Victorian *and* modernist historians, scholarly *and* popular. But while “Eliot was able to overcome his skepticism with a moment of transcendental vision” (Longenbach 21), Woolf could do so only fleetingly and almost always self-consciously. Her skepticism was directed not only at Victorian historical knowledge but also at *both* ‘modernist’ challenges to it (the literary modernists’ existential doubt and mysticism, and the historical modernists’ scientific factuality). She questioned amateur and disciplinary, research-based and imaginative modes of knowing the past. Such thorough misgivings placed her in an impossible position with regard to history throughout her writing life.

Woolf's generation could not help but be personally enmeshed in their inheritance from the Victorians, however much they may have rejected it. Unlike even the earliest generation of postmodernists, these writers remembered their Victorian forebears as individual people rather than as historical figures, outdated scholars, or prefabricated symbols, whether of patriarchy and prudishness or of a lost epistemic and moral stability. Born in 1882, Woolf lived about a third of her life under Queen Victoria's reign; her father was just four years old upon Victoria's accession to the throne and died three years after that queen. The personal nature of Woolf's connection to ‘the Victorians’ surfaces in her 1941 *Between the Acts*, in its amused understanding of Etty Springett's reaction to a critical caricature of the Victorian era: “children did draw trucks in mines; [...] yet Papa

read Walter Scott aloud after dinner; and divorced ladies were not received at Court. How difficult to come to any conclusion! She wished they would hurry on with the next scene” (164). Yet personal memories of the Victorian do not lead exclusively to nostalgia (however uncomfortable). Equally by virtue of this immediacy, Woolf’s generation’s *objections* to Victorian epistemology and values were often deeply personal, molded as they were by lived realities: feeling oneself left out of history (both its action and its writing) because of one’s sex, for instance, or the conviction that Victorian self-assuredness killed one’s friends in the Great War.

The sheer multiplicity of Woolf’s connections to historians, historical biographers, and the professional and amateur study of the past in the late Victorian and Edwardian periods is astonishing. Most obviously, Woolf’s father was Leslie Stephen, first editor of the *Dictionary of National Biography* and author of *The History of English Thought in the Eighteenth Century*, but perhaps now best known as “that staunch Victorian patriarch” to a young Virginia Stephen and her siblings (Hill 351). In Woolf’s case, nineteenth-century historical authority—later to be so often critiqued through the image of an old, rich, white, university-educated man delusionally convinced of his own voice’s objectivity—lived in her home in quite literal form. Virginia Stephen was excluded from her brothers’ university education, and guided in her reading of the Victorian historians and a great deal else, by an influential late-Victorian historian and biographer. Thus, not only does Victorian authority often manifest in her essays in the figures of men she knew or heard about in gossip (rather than always-already historical figures she only knew from books), but also in her particular upbringing this authority was significantly an intellectual and specifically historical one.

Yet although Woolf's relationship with history began with her father, it certainly did not end with him. Virginia Stephen and then Virginia Woolf had a vast range of personal, scholarly, and professional interactions with history and historical biography, both professional and amateur. Her paternal grandfather was early Victorian historian Sir James Stephen, author of *Lectures on the History of France* (1851) and regius professor of modern history at Cambridge beginning in 1849; his granddaughter would read his *Essays in Ecclesiastical Biography* (1849) nearly half a century later (Hill 353). Her father and grandfather were friendly with Thomas Carlyle.<sup>29</sup> The Stephens and Macaulays were also friends, and Leslie Stephen seems to have guided his daughter to read Thomas Babington Macaulay's historical work (Hill 353). Trevelyan, Macaulay's great-nephew and an acquaintance of the Bloomsbury men during their university days, was of course familiar to Woolf. She was also long friends with (and very briefly engaged to) the highly unconventional biographer Lytton Strachey.

Furthermore, her connections to historical work were not all mediated through the men in her life: after a struggle with her resistant father, for instance, Virginia Stephen attended lectures in history at King's College, London, in 1897 (DeSalvo 103). In 1905 she taught history at Morley College, a working-class women's college (*Essays* 1: xvi).<sup>30</sup> She reviewed histories and biographies throughout her career. And yet she markedly lacked formal training or official authority with regard to the subject. During the year of

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<sup>29</sup> Woolf recounts that a grief-stricken Leslie Stephen repeatedly begged, "I was not as bad as Carlyle, was I?" after the death of his wife (*Moments* 41). This perception of the lofty nineteenth-century historian as abysmal husband recalls Eliot's Casaubon, as well as the real-life demands of the role of historian's wife as discussed by Bonnie Smith in *The Gender of History*.

<sup>30</sup> In this teaching she is further connected to Trevelyan, who also lectured at Morley that year (Westman, "First Orlando" 47-8).

her stint at Morley, Virginia Stephen recorded that it is tricky to review a book “when you don't know the subject”; the *Times* rejected her review, which its editor saw as “not ‘academic’ enough”: instead, “a professed historian is needed” (Fox 105). The Victorian girl who grew up to be a modernist novelist and essayist had first wanted to be a historian, and her diaries and letters attest that she toyed with the idea of writing a history throughout her life.

Thus, while Stephen is clearly relevant to Woolf's relationship with Victorian historical authority, it is important to avoid assuming that the man and the scholarly legacy line up one-to-one in Woolf's work. Stephen is not simply a symbol for Victorian historical thought; nor does Victorianism merely stand for Stephen. In her otherwise insightful chapter on *Orlando* and *Flush*, Ruth Hoberman slips too easily between person and tradition when she writes:

Woolf's anti-Victorianism emerged more gradually [than Strachey's], and her 1932 essay about her father is extremely affectionate. By the late nineteenth thirties, however, [...] she is bitterly anti-Victorian and critical of her father. Like Strachey, she equated what she most disliked about Victorianism with the form and content of the traditional biography—a massive, artless compendium of letters and chronicle, compiled by an awestruck disciple. (135-6)

While Hoberman reminds us that Stephen did not actually write that sort of book, she seems to imagine in Woolf a conflation of her father and Victorianism, despite Woolf's extensive reading of her father's and other Victorians' work. Hoberman furthermore posits a linear development from affection to criticism that I do not see in Woolf's writings with regard to either Stephen or Victorian biographical and historical writing. Instead, this chapter foregrounds the difficulties inherent in turning against a legacy so personal and so complex. For Woolf's original audience, too, the Victorians were

individuals and individual scholars rather than a homogenous mass; she was able to assume many readers' familiarity with historians such as Macaulay, Carlyle, Froude, and, indeed, Stephen. As various critics have noted (to various ends),<sup>31</sup> Woolf does not simply reject her father or Victorian historiography or biography; she sometimes treats both with appreciation, and she constantly borrows and inherits from even as she critiques and writes outside them.

In other words, Woolf actively engages Victorian historical authority as an irresolvable legacy. Arguing against the common caricature of Stephen as overwhelming patriarch, Katherine C. Hill claims that Stephen regarded his youngest daughter as "his literary and intellectual heir" (351) and, in a more complicated way than a simply damning view would allow, made positive contributions to her intellectual development. Regardless of how we settle the question of Stephen's motivations or success as a parent, his daughter did read a great many histories from his library, along with Stephen's marginalia. She literally inherited his books upon his death in 1904 ("Library"), and she continued to use the books he had read and written even as she launched a critique of their limitations. In a much larger sense, too, Woolf and the rest of her generation faced an imposing inheritance upon the death of Victoria, a symbolic moment that underscored a felt need for a 'Victorianism' that might be shaken off.

Leonard Woolf, the man who would become Virginia's husband in 1912, writes in his 1960 memoir *Sowing* that even during Victoria's final illness, "we already felt that we were living in an era of incipient revolt and that we ourselves were mortally involved in this revolt against [...] bourgeois Victorianism" (166). In this passage, Victoria's death

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<sup>31</sup> See for instance Hill, Hoberman (ch. 5), Hotho-Jackson, and Westman ("First Orlando").

serves as a symbol for the death of “Victorian civilisation” and provides an opportunity for Leonard Woolf to free himself from a huge range of influences reified here as “Victorianism.” Perhaps because of her earlier death, but certainly also because of her concern with women’s rights and women’s biographical and historical invisibility, Woolf never approached this degree of simplicity in her attitude toward her Victorian forebears. Instead, Woolf’s reviews of historical works, her historical and historiographic essays, and her history-minded novels *Orlando* and *Between the Acts* repeatedly engage an inheritance whose authority is both desirable—in its potential to change readers’ perceptions and thus the world and women’s position in it—and despicable—patriarchal and epistemologically untenable. In the following section, I turn to Woolf’s long, conflicted engagement with historical knowledge and thus to the broader question of how she navigates her generation’s Victorian historiographic inheritance.

### **Impossible Histories**

If many critics blame the Bloomsbury group for the inadequacy of our received images of the Victorians, Simon Joyce argues that we should avoid similarly oversimplifying the Bloomsbury group by assuming it was unified on this point. He rereads Strachey’s *Eminent Victorians* as far from “a systematic assault on the previous century” (642)—and instead, as a deconstructionist reading of the Victorian era as informed by internally inconsistent values and demands. By contrast, Joyce aligns Virginia, along with Leonard, Woolf with the “anxiety to distance oneself absolutely from what came before” (631)—with the pull within the Bloomsbury group to reify and reject all things Victorian. Through a reading of Virginia Woolf’s 1923 essay “Mr.

Bennett and Mrs. Brown,” Joyce identifies “an abstracted Victorianism [...] arrayed against an equally abstracted force of rebellion” (639). Joyce helpfully distinguishes between a critique that inverts ‘the Victorian,’ “pinning down the supposed essence of the period and then substituting antithetical values and qualities in its place” (648), and one that deconstructs it; he sees both at play in Bloomsbury. But his reading oversimplifies Woolf’s relationship with Victorian thought in a way that excludes her long-term and complex engagement with the period’s historical-epistemological legacy.

The approach with which Joyce identifies Woolf “leave[s] the initial characterization in place rather than unsettling it, so that ‘the Victorian’ hardens as an analytical concept the more it comes under attack; it is thus available as a reference point or rallying cry for subsequent forces of reactionary counter-inversion, from Evelyn Waugh to Margaret Thatcher” (648). A deconstructive approach like Strachey’s, on the other hand, “insists that the dominant is never a coherent entity but instead contains contradictory elements and ambiguities” and, in focusing on these contradictions, “pushes fixed definitions to the point of collapse or chiasmus, where one term of a binary opposition inevitably entails its supposed other” (648). And yet, as I argue in the following sections, Woolf often does just that with regard to Victorian epistemology as well as to historical periodization more generally. While Joyce’s warning against assuming a Bloomsbury party line is extremely useful, his relatively brief treatment depends so heavily on the oft-cited “Mr. Bennett and Mrs. Brown” that he freezes Woolf’s ever-moving and ever-self-questioning approach in a moment of caricature.

Instead, I see Woolf’s historical and historiographic texts as dynamic *acts* of inheritance: they never quite figure out what they want to inherit or what they must



inherit. Woolf's stances toward the legacy of Victorian historical thought are deconstructive in the sense that they remain plural and admit an inability to pin down the heritage. It is precisely this engagement and *not* a straightforward acceptance or rejection of a tradition that constitutes inheritance in a deconstructive view.<sup>32</sup> From this perspective, rather than seeing Woolf's ongoing ambivalence as mere inconsistency and confusion—as inadequacy to the task of this particular intellectual inheritance—we might understand it as a responsible, active effort to think through the past and the future in their complexity.

This chapter attends to the messiness of Woolf's vexed inheritance by taking seriously the messiness of a long career and especially of a peculiar novel. *Orlando* is often dismissed from understandings of Woolf and of modernism as a mere squib, a mere *jeu d'esprit*, a mere love letter<sup>33</sup>—a dismissal that stands to deprive us of significant insight into the transition from the people who lived under Victoria to 'the Victorians' whom writers in the later twentieth century could so easily deride or wistfully recall. By looking at *Orlando* and at the broader context of Woolf's works, we can observe how Woolf's critique of Victorian historical authority deconstructs as well as inverts an image of that discourse's values, conventions, and practitioners. *Orlando* itself invokes such a

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<sup>32</sup> I obviously borrow here from Jacques Derrida's *Specters of Marx*. In my reading, Woolf's texts obey what Derrida sees as the order of inheritance: "*one must filter, sift, criticize, one must sort out several different possibles that inhabit the same injunction*" (16). She navigates both a paternal and a textual legacy, and indeed a paternal legacy that is in significant part textual, encountering "the readability of a legacy" that "call[s] for and at the same time def[ies] interpretation" (16). Derrida's deconstructive reading of inheritance is both illuminating of Woolf's and, in its insistence on the filial nature of the act, problematic in view of Woolf's exploration of gender. For an insightful feminist reading of *Specters of Marx*, see Nancy J. Holland.

<sup>33</sup> For more on scholars' habit of dismissing *Orlando* as insufficiently serious, see Boehm.

broader context, asking to be read alongside Woolf's other works and in the terms of a number of discourses when it blurs the boundaries of the individual and independent work in blurring the boundaries between personal and public references, between fiction and fact, between biography and history, and between Woolf's own fiction and nonfiction. It seems to invite critics to read it alongside other works by Woolf through enticing little intertextual echoes, only a small part of its thoroughgoing game of intertextuality. The invitation often leads readers to Woolf's ongoing engagement—and frustrations—with the challenges of historical narrative.

Some such echoes interact with the writing she completed alongside *Orlando*: for instance, the novel's reference to Queen Elizabeth's wax figure (23) rings of the 1928 essay "Waxworks at the Abbey," and the narrator's insistence that we are composed "so unequally of clay and diamonds, of rainbow and granite" (77) calls up Woolf's description of human character in her 1927 review "The New Biography." Other echoes resound across her writing life, as is the case when *Orlando* includes one of Woolf's many references to the work so firmly associated with her father's name: "The true length of a person's life, whatever the *Dictionary of National Biography* may say, is always a matter of dispute. Indeed it is a difficult business—this time-keeping; nothing more quickly disorders it than contact with any of the arts; and it may have been her love of poetry that was to blame [...]" (306).

The reference is amused but also serious; *Orlando* writes a life that cannot be accommodated by the historical-biographic approach represented by the *DNB* because that approach is concerned only with external facts rather than internal experience, and because Orlando is for much of her life a woman and thus a problematic choice of

subject. While Victorian historical biography pins down and records, Woolf, through her category-defying character, proposes attention to the messy, changeable, and intangible workings of personality. In “The Lives of the Obscure” (1925), Woolf deviates in a more straightforward way from the *DNB*’s patriarchal values, pulling a female figure from the background of a father’s life into the foreground of her own: the *Dictionary*, as Andrew McNeillie observes, includes Eleanor Anne Ormerod only “under the entry for her father, George Ormerod (1785-1873), historian of Cheshire, as ‘a distinguished entomologist’” (*Essays* IV: 145). In her essay, in contrast, Woolf inverts this convention by imagining the life and career of the daughter, allowing George only a bit part as tiresome Victorian patriarch. And yet, McNeillie notes: “That Woolf when reading for an essay or review habitually consulted her father’s essays and contributions to the *Dictionary of National Biography* is borne out by her reading notes” (*Essays* IV: xii). Woolf seems to have used the *DNB* both as a reference work and as an example of the limitations of Victorian biography, neither accepting nor rejecting its knowledge.

In its *DNB* reference and throughout, *Orlando* performs Woolf’s concern with the difficulty of representing personality and of experiencing a connection with lives lived in the past, without violating those individuals’ reality and difference. *Orlando* also echoes Woolf’s nonfictional reflections on history in its imagery of haunting and burial—flexible motifs that sometimes emphasize continuity with the past but sometimes present that past as totally inaccessible because it is dead and gone.<sup>34</sup> This distinction, between the past as uncanny presence and the past as contained absence, contrasts Victorian historicism (with its attention to historical difference) with a mystical, romantic sense of

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<sup>34</sup> In addition to the two essays discussed here, see especially “Their Passing Hour” (1905) and “Maria Edgeworth and Her Circle” (1909).

contact with the dead through haunting. Within the novel, this distinction breaks itself down even as it is produced; its deconstruction is magnified through the language and imagery it shares with Woolf's nonfictional writings.

The association of history and haunting are particularly clear in "The Lives of the Obscure," which imagines bits of the lives of the "Taylors and Edgeworths" in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, of eighteenth-century writer Laetitia Pilkington, and of the entomologist Woolf rescues from the *DNB*'s shadows. Here, she explains that "one likes romantically to feel oneself a deliverer advancing with lights across the waste of years to the rescue of some stranded ghost" (*Essays* IV: 119). The essay's imagery opposes this historical approach to that of history books, by imagining that "the unknown" liquefy the literal containers of scholarly historical knowledge:

instead of keeping their identity separate, as remarkable people do, they seem to merge into one another, their very boards and title-pages and frontispieces dissolving, and their innumerable pages melting into continuous years so that we can lie back and look up into the fine mist-like substance of countless lives, and pass unhindered from century to century, from life to life. (120)

In "The Duke and Duchess of Newcastle-Upon-Tyne" (1911), however, Woolf complicates this schema by associating historical research and suicide in the figure of a man so interested in and fond of the dead that he decides to join them.

Before turning to the seventeenth-century duke and duchess of the title, Woolf opens with a story about historical scholarship: "Some one has probably written a story in which the hero is forever thinking about the dead. [...] Becoming obsessed by the idea, he spends his life in reading, volume after volume. He discovers that great men had uncles and aunts and cousins. He dives after them, so to speak, and rescues them by the hair of their heads" (*Essays* I: 345). Proceeding with his research, this historian hero

reasons that “the living change and lie and drop one; all the arguments, in short, are on his side; and finally, outraged by contact with unreal fugitive flesh-encumbered live people, he draws his razor and departs” (345). Woolf sympathizes with the sentiment and says it can make a book feel “fresh” (345), but is nonetheless glad that “there is generally some obstacle to prevent us from crashing through the little plank on which we stand into the immense abyss” (346). Unfamiliar with the document-writers’ attitudes toward writing and thus how exactly to read their words, tone, “style,” the historical researcher is prevented from quite tipping over into the world of the dead. This parable does not oppose romantic contact with the dead and scholarly distance from them; rather, it suggests that truly successful historical scholarship could only end in suicide, if it were not fortunately impossible because of the nature of historical evidence and the pastness of the past.

In other words, at least in this review, Woolf questions the line between historicism and mysticism by painting the former as a desire for a communion with the dead unreachable through scholarly means—a communion that can only be ontological, not epistemic. Without dissociating herself from the effort to know the past, she simultaneously deconstructs both a romantic/mystical and a scholarly approach to it, in part by questioning the distinction between them. When Orlando visits his family crypt, his over-the-top employment of this familiar trope mocks not only Orlando’s longwindedness but also that of the narrator, drawing attention to the telling of the tale rather than allowing the sense of transparency so important to conventional historical authority (whether Victorian or modernist). Orlando muses:

“Nothing remains of all these Princes,” Orlando would say, indulging in

some pardonable exaggeration of their rank, “except one digit,” and he would take a skeleton hand in his and bend the joint this way and that. “Whose hand was it?” he went on to ask. “The right or the left? The hand of man or woman, of age or youth? Had it urged the war horse, or plied the needle? Had it plucked the rose, or grasped cold steel? Had it—” but here either his invention failed him or, what is more likely, provided him with so many instances of what a hand can do that he shrank, as his wont was, from the cardinal labour of composition, which is excision, and he put it with the other bones, thinking how there was a writer called Thomas Browne, a Doctor of Norwich, whose writing upon such subjects took his fancy amazingly. (71-2)

Orlando takes his philosophizing so far that we are bound to wonder whether, rather than experiencing a genuine connection with his ancestors or understanding of mortality, he is simply showboating to himself, admiring his own gloomy reflections and appropriating the bodies of the dead as mere props. In implicitly comparing his or her own narrative style to that of Orlando, the narrator also allows us to question whether he or she is sacrificing historical difference and distance for a good story and clever theories. And in directing humor at a trope its author sometimes employs more seriously, *Orlando* invites us through echoes and differences to question Woolf’s and *Orlando*’s relationships both with the past and with authoritative Victorian historiography.

### **Reifying Victorian History: Caricature and the Historian Figure in Woolf**

The ambiguities of Woolf’s historical approach—pulled between an emphasis on continuity and a concern for historical difference, and between a love of history and a belief that real historical knowledge, insight into the personalities and lives of the past, is unattainable—complicate her treatment of ‘the Victorian’ as it is represented through Victorian historiography and the familiar figure of the Victorian historian. Woolf’s writings value the authority of factuality even as they project a deep suspicion toward a

nineteenth-century historical-epistemological certainty with regard to the past and to other people's lives. As they express these opposed and intertwined feelings, Woolf's fictional and nonfictional writings work to posit a Victorianism stable enough to be rejected. Yet, for Woolf, such stability and the historical certainty it implies are necessarily fleeting; her works exhibit intense self-consciousness about easy caricatures of the past and its people. Interestingly, it is *because* of one of her major disagreements with the Victorian historical tradition—its conviction that the past is objectively knowable and can be pinned down through the sheer weight of enough facts—that she cannot quite posit and simply reject or accept 'the Victorian.' Instead, she acknowledges the allure of such modes of knowing and simultaneously laughs at herself for feeling it.

For instance, in a 1908 review of a collection of a family's mid-nineteenth-century letters and diaries that she feels ought not to have been published, Virginia Stephen remarks that reading the volume is not without its pleasures. The figures are "just distant enough to be old-fashioned, but hardly as yet picturesque. It seems very probable that such people were alive in the year 1840; it is comfortable to imagine that the world before our time was so cheerful a place" (*Essays* I: 241)—comfortable but not, the tone implies, particularly realistic. In another review, Stephen asserts ironically that "The past has an immense charm of its own; and if one can show how people lived a hundred years ago—one means by that, how they powdered their hair, and drove in yellow chariots, and passed Lord Byron in the street—one need not trouble oneself with minds and emotions" (*Essays* I: 315). She continues:

How charming our ancestors were!—so simple in their manners, so humorous in their behaviour, so strange in their expressions! [...] There is no need to tease ourselves with the suspicion that they were quite different in the flesh, and as ugly, as complex, and as emotional as we are, for their

simplicity is more amusing to believe in and much easier to write about. Nevertheless, there are moments when we bewail the opportunity that Miss Hill seems to have missed—the opportunity of getting at the truth at the risk of being dull. (318)

In these reviews, she sympathizes with authors' and readers' drives to caricature and nostalgia but renders both modes as obviously inadequate to the task of "getting at the truth." Though opposed in spirit, the easy comforts of rejecting a caricature of the past or wistfully imagining a golden age are equally oversimplifying drives.

Woolf's "anxiety to distance [her]self absolutely from what came before" (Joyce 631) is thus problematized by her lurking affection for it, and even more significantly by her deep doubt that we can truly know and stabilize "what came before" in the first place. Carrying on an ambivalence present in her writings at least as early as 1907, even her final novel reflects with interest and doubt on the historical processes of reification and periodization. In *Between the Acts*, Miss La Trobe's pageant presents the expected historical periods—as Mrs. Manresa reflects while looking ahead in the program, "Early Briton; Plantagenets; Tudors; Stuarts—she ticked them off, but probably she had forgotten a reign or two"—and the expected historical figures—Queen Elizabeth, a Victorian constable. But it also shocks and confuses its audience with unexpected irony and, in the end, fragmentation.

*Between the Acts* uses not only the pageant but its audience's reactions to question the realism of historical periodization and generalization.<sup>35</sup> When Isa, William, and Mrs.

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<sup>35</sup> The issue of periodization arises in Woolf's essays as well. Most notably, as Joyce points out, Woolf's famous pronouncement in "Character in Fiction" that "on or about December 1910 human character changed" (*Essays* III: 421) is both flippantly specific and at odds with the traditional periodization of British history in excluding Edward VII's May 1910 death. Given that "the end of Victoria's reign [...] produced a range of predictions—some apocalyptic and others entirely dumbfounded—about what the future



Swithin discuss the Victorian scenes they have just watched together, their disagreement about the nature of historical knowledge draws attention to the blurriness of boundaries such as that between the Victorian and the modern:

“Were they like that?” Isa asked abruptly. She looked at Mrs. Swithin as if she had been a dinosaur or a very diminutive mammoth. Extinct she must be, since she had lived in the reign of Queen Victoria. [...]

“The Victorians,” Mrs. Swithin mused. “I don’t believe,” she said with her odd little smile, “that there ever were such people. Only you and me and William dressed differently.”

“You don’t believe in history,” said William. (174-5)

It is not modern William but Victorian Mrs. Swithin, avid reader of an *Outline of History*, who doubts such typically Victorian historicism, with its emphasis on the spirit of the age and differences between historical periods. And yet again, this exchange problematizes any simple relationship with Victorian knowledge and values. Woolf shares Mrs.

Swithin’s knowing smile about imaginary entities such as ‘the Victorians,’ even as she shares Miss La Trobe’s critique of the Victorians and their hypocrisy.<sup>36</sup>

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might bring, all certain that it would at any rate be entirely different from what had come before,” Joyce argues, “Woolf’s de-emphasizing of monarchical succession is itself significant, and consistent with the larger argument of ‘Mr. Bennett and Mrs. Brown’ that nominally ‘Victorian’ traits of writing and perception were continued by the Edwardian novelists under discussion: in this, as in many other ways, the Edwardians had failed to engineer a decisive break with the past” (632). The monarchy is both emphasized and deflated when Woolf invokes Queen Victoria in the name and description of Mrs. Brown, depicting this “defining symbol of her age brought down to earth” (Joyce 633). In these two cases, readers’ expectations regarding and Woolf’s treatment of the Victorian are placed under scrutiny through unconventional (and absurdly specific) periodization and through the shorthand of a “Mrs. Brown” who must be reimagined now that Victorian and Edwardian assumptions about her are falling apart. While the latter impulse conforms to Joyce’s claim that Woolf reifies and inverts ‘Victorianism,’ the unsettling and underscoring of both conventional and Woolf’s own periodization is an impulse more closely tied to what Joyce calls deconstruction.

<sup>36</sup> As the pageant enters “The Victorian Age” (149), its tone turns pointed just as audience members most desire nostalgia. The constable, figure for Victorian “authority” (161), at

Though the two works are obviously different in genre, structure, and tone, Woolf's final novel returns strikingly to the concerns of the much-earlier *Orlando*. Woolf had neither resolved nor walked away from the historical-epistemological problems raised in this funny little fantasy, as I have established through her essays and reviews. The shared techniques of these two novels, so different in other ways, underscore even more strongly the repeated struggles that characterize her inheritance of historical authority. Each novel uses as a structural principle a familiar historical genre—biography in *Orlando* and the pageant in *Between the Acts*. And each problematizes historical periodization (and historical knowledge more broadly) through the emergence of that historical genre into the fragmented present. The audience of Miss La Trobe's pageant models the discomfort of readers as we reach 'the present moment' of *Between the Acts*: before the scenes even unfold, viewers are displeased at the program's projection of "The Present Time. Ourselves." "But what could she know about ourselves?," they protest; "The Elizabethans, yes; the Victorians, perhaps; but ourselves [...]—it was ridiculous" (178-9). They are prepared for one of two conclusions: a "flattering tribute" (182) through a depiction of the present as flattening as that of the Victorian, or "a Grand Ensemble. Army; Navy; Union Jack; and behind them perhaps [...] the Church" (179). They are not at all prepared for ten minutes of unmediated reality, "Swallows, cows, etc." (179), or a noisy rush of the actors in costumes from various periods holding a random

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first speaks unsurprisingly of "empire," "duty," "purity," "security," "prosperity," "respectability," and "the laws of God and Man" (161-2). As his speech continues, though, the constable's language begins to suggest the emptiness of Victorian charity and religion. He concludes, "Let 'em sweat at the mines; cough at the looms; rightly endure their lot. That's the price of empire; that's the white man's burden" (163). At least some audience members feel affronted; Mrs. Lynn Jones finds herself uncomfortable, as though "a sneer had been aimed at her father; therefore at herself" (164).

collection of reflective items “To show us up,” as the audience defensively interprets (186). The pageant ought, its viewers expect, to end within what they see as history, not to turn on them in their seats.

Similarly, while the *Orlando* narrator reminds us of “the first duty of a biographer, which is to plod [...] on and on methodically till we fall plump into the grave and write *finis* on the tombstone above our heads” (65), Orlando is still very much alive at the end of the book. Defying the generic rules of historical biography as well as the biological limitations on the length of a human life, Orlando jolts “violently” into “the present moment,” ten o’clock on the morning of 11 October 1928 (298). *Orlando: A Biography* ends not with a tombstone and *finis* but with Orlando’s unfinished thought, punctuated with an ellipsis, and “the twelfth stroke of midnight, Thursday, the eleventh of October, Nineteen Hundred and Twenty-eight” (329). Like the pageant and its audience in *Between the Acts*, Orlando enters the present moment with confusion and shock but does continue into it, crossing historical periods into the uncharacterizable modern day. If we feel our experiences are so unique, so unassimilable to the generalizations of historical narrative, *Orlando* and *Between the Acts* seem to ask of the genres they invoke, how can we assume differently of past lives?

Woolf’s critique of Victorian historiography thus repeatedly and comically self-destructs. For instance, *Orlando* implies disapprovingly that the Victorian was an oversimplifying mode of knowledge. In order to render judgment in the legal cases that span centuries, the courts must define and stabilize Orlando’s gender—a definition that occurs during the Victorian age both legally and in Orlando’s bending to the conventions of the period. When the legal ruling arrives at her door, it is her fiancé who manfully

orders the messenger up, “as if on his own quarter deck” (254). And yet *Orlando* also winks at the modern reification of the Victorian when the narrator describes in nineteenth-century St. James Park “a conglomeration [...] of the most heterogeneous and ill-assorted objects, piled higgledy-piggledy in a vast mound where the statue of Queen Victoria now stands” (232).

In the first decades of the twentieth century, writers were only beginning to stabilize ‘the Victorian,’ and thus the Victorian historian, as an image to reject or emulate. Woolf and others remembered the variety of actual Victorian historians and biographers, people—mostly men—who disagreed with each other and whose works and theories were often internally inconsistent, who had personal lives and personalities as well as careers and works, who used to send one’s father a book or read one poetry on Sunday evenings. As Joyce implies, rebelling against a tradition involves both defining that tradition and allowing oneself to be defined in part by it, allowing the terms of the discussion to be set by that tradition: it posits the tradition as an image of authority. Such rebellion is part but not all of the historical questioning of *Orlando*, which simplifies and stabilizes—though never completely—the traditions of biography, historiography, and narrative Woolf learned from her father and her extensive reading, initially in her father’s library.

By allowing herself inconsistency and by making fun of herself alongside her Victorian forebears, by doubting her own access to historical knowledge as much as theirs, Woolf explores the problem of historical writing from many angles. Her career spans decades in which the intellectual authority of historians, presenting themselves as objectively reconstructing the past, is unsettled in the academic disciplines as well as in

the arts. Time and again, Woolf recognizes the problem but also recognizes her inability to solve it—and entertains the impossibility of its solution. This chapter’s remaining sections envision *Orlando*’s humor and the instability of its narrator as richly accommodating to the difficulties of Woolf’s position, making space for a fluid but seriously engaged historiographic critique.

### **The *Orlando* Narrator and Historical Authority**

In shifting amongst modes of knowing, *Orlando* draws attention to the difficulty of distinguishing amongst those modes, especially underscoring the work of the imagination even in disciplinary history. It pretends at moments to follow traditional procedures, as when the narrator invokes that most familiar function of realist historical fiction, by which such a novel ‘fills in the blanks’ of recorded history. Sometimes, regrettably but inevitably, “a hole in the manuscript” makes it “necessary to speculate, to surmise, and even to make use of the imagination” (119). And yet, this text is anything but a traditional historical novel humbly filling in archival gaps with realistic though imaginative reconstructions. Rather, from page to page, and even line to line, the narrative voice of *Orlando* pointedly shifts the ground of its own authority. Instead of covering up the seams between its historical and imaginative elements as a traditional historical fiction would do, it insistently draws attention to its violation of the boundaries amongst history, biography, novel-writing, and poetry. In shifting and blurring its own authority with regard to the past, *Orlando* deconstructs rather than simply inverting these received conventions of knowing and narrating history.

The *Orlando* narrator is as difficult to pin down as *Orlando* him- or herself.

About one-fifth of the way through *Orlando*, the narrator announces: “Up to this point [...] documents, both private and historical, have made it possible to fulfill the first duty of a biographer, which is to plod [...] in the indelible footprints of truth” (65)—in other words, that the text has so far operated in the strictly documented and truthful mode of historical biography. Although we have now arrived at an event “dark, mysterious, and undocumented,” the narrator reaffirms a “simple duty [...] to state the facts as far as they are known” (65). And yet, *Orlando* makes a joke of the idea that such a duty might be simple, or that this narrator is genuinely attempting a straightforward account of the facts. Later, when we encounter that “hole in the manuscript,” the narrator invokes an official historical record but focuses on its gaps, including literal destruction of parts of the record by fire; though the tone here is one of humbly making do with the available record, the narrator proceeds to exercise “the imagination” with gusto while underscoring the unknowability of the past (119). As its narrator slips between the roles of artist and researcher, storyteller and truth-teller, the novel underscores the inadequacy of either traditional form to the task of opening up historical understanding to the vagaries of personality, gender, and human experience as Woolf paints them here. And as he or she slips between the roles of man and woman, the novel draws attention to how the intellectual authority of those roles is also gendered.

*Orlando*’s narrator is an ambiguous and unnamed figure, a consciousness that shifts allegiances throughout the text. In some passages, the narrator identifies with and claims the authority of the historian, historical biographer, or “historian of letters” (113). He or she consults those fire-damaged records, analyzes their meaning as artifacts (121), and quotes extensively from a damaged diary, a letter, and a newspaper in

‘reconstructing’ a sequence of events in seventeenth-century Constantinople (126-30). This narrative consciousness operates like a professional historian in constructing the text by including a corrective, source-based footnote (167); a preface invoking archival research and historical knowledge (interestingly, acknowledging her *husband’s* “profound historical knowledge” and “accuracy”); an index of names, mostly of historical persons; supposedly authentic (though historically impossible) illustrations; and the subtitle “A Biography.”

This historian narrator makes jibes at novelists and poets, positing them as other. He or she claims, for instance: “To give a truthful account of London society [...] is beyond the powers of the biographer or the historian. Only those who have little need of the truth, and no respect for it—the poets and the novelists—can be trusted to do it, for this is one of the cases where truth does not exist” (192). This passage asserts that “Society is the most powerful concoction in the world and society has no existence whatsoever. Such monsters the poets and the novelists alone can deal with; with such something-nothings their works are stuffed out to prodigious size; and to them with the best will in the world we are content to leave it” (194). These attacks undermine themselves by appearing in a work by a well-known novelist, and undermine their supposed discourse (that of scholarly historical biography) by admitting it inadequate to the rather important subject of “society” as the term extends beyond the upper classes and embraces human interaction and experience. Despite this irony, they also genuinely undermine traditions of poetry and novels that can only accommodate the silliness of parties, curtsies, and fashion: “is this what people call life?,” Orlando wonders in distress (195).

At other moments, however, the historian is posited as other. Occasionally this move implies little judgment, positioning the narrator as a reader of history: “The Great Frost was, historians tell us, the most severe that has ever visited these islands” (33). At other points, the narrator disparages the values of conventional historiography, claiming for instance that “these moralities belong, and should be left to the historian, since they are as dull as ditch water” (149). In another scene, the narrator implies that historians lack a genuine understanding of history in their tendency to simplifying narratives: Orlando takes a train for the first time “without giving a thought to ‘that stupendous invention, which had (the historians say) completely changed the face of Europe in the past twenty years’ (as, indeed, happens much more frequently than historians suppose)” (272-3). In the same vein, when a young Orlando presents himself to Queen Elizabeth—one of several famous historical figures who make cameos as we follow his and then her life—his view is obscured by “shyness,” and he bows his head “as the great rings flashed in the water and then something pressed his hair—which, perhaps, accounts for his seeing nothing more likely to be of use to a historian” (22). The implication is that the narrator is *not* a historian, as he or she finds plenty of interest in the scene and Orlando’s experience of it.

In still other scenes the narrator wavers between factual and fictional stances before our very eyes; even the preface acknowledges Victorian historical novelist Scott and Victorian historian Macaulay right next to each other. The “hole in the manuscript” appears in a passage of such wavering: “Just when we thought to elucidate a secret that has puzzled historians for a hundred years,” the narrator explains, “there was a hole in the manuscript big enough to put your finger through. We have done our best to piece out a



meager summary from the charred fragments that remain; but often it has been necessary to speculate, to surmise, and even to make use of the imagination” (119). Here, a historical biographer bound to documented facts admits the method of invention in the absence of archival evidence. Similarly, but less frankly, from one paragraph to the next in describing Orlando’s daily life in Constantinople, the narrator moves from a historical approach with hesitant modifiers—“it would seem,” “somewhat,” “[a]bout,” “apparently”—to a novelistic approach, confidently recounting Orlando’s thoughts, feelings, and private actions (120-1). And when the narrator observes Orlando at her family prayer book and wonders about her “pious thoughts” and “evil passions,” he or she is at a loss for answers because “Novelist, poet, historian all falter with their hand on that door” (172).

This narrator sometimes appeals to the authority of a historical record and the conventions of historical biography and history, from indices to grand theories of causation and historical change, yet often takes the liberties granted poets and novelists. He or she rejects both historiography—boring, inaccurate, self-satisfied—and historical fiction—disrespectful of facts, obsessed with the meaningless mess we call ‘society.’ These ambiguities and this all-encompassing dissatisfaction with available modes of historical narrative bear out Woolf’s stance in her essays and reviews. But it does so through an extended performance that opens out into the authorities and territories of multiple discourses, and moreover through a performance that uses the unpredictable and illogical—an inconsistent narrative stance, an impossible hero/heroine, jokes and laughter—as a tool for unsettling the rationality and objectivity of scholarly historical discourses.

### **Making Fun: Humor in *Orlando* and “The New Biography”**

*Orlando* is funny, and nearly everything it says is a joke. This comic exuberance, related to the text's lighthearted sense of fantasy, allows its narrator and main character to exist outside traditional categories of sex, time, genre, and modes of truth. It also often results in critics writing it off as, for instance, “a squib [...] a playful exercise in androgyny [...] that] proved curiously successful commercially” (Bradbury 180). *Orlando* certainly is playful and pleasurable, but its play is not simply amusing; it also allows Woolf to present this problem she cannot resolve, the problem of historical representation. In this section, I consider the work of humor in *Orlando* by following its echo of Woolf's 1927 review “The New Biography”; the dialogue between these two texts further illuminates *Orlando*'s performance of multiple historical discourses.

In Woolf's essays, both disciplinary history and more personal relationships with the historical past are represented as powerful, entertaining, impossible, and life-destroying. In a single text, *Orlando* encompasses this range of impressions, juggling them through its sometimes-casual, sometimes-serious, sometimes-poetic, sometimes-fact-obsessed narrator, the subject of so much irony and the source of so much amusement. This novel's performative treatment of the Victorian era and of its narrative, biographical, and historiographic conventions is parodic and mocking; it particularly sets up and undercuts the idea of the historical biographer who fancies himself *the* authority on the past, his knowledge ungendered, universal, transparent, factual, and therefore unassailable. The sometimes bumbling and document-obsessed narrator is pulled, like Orlando herself, by the apparently extremely strong force of Victorian conventionality,

and he or she struggles against the absurdity that makes writing Orlando's life in that period virtually impossible. The comedy of these passages allows us to see a narrator who is both entirely, stereotypically Victorian and at odds with Victorian conventions—just as it allows for an Orlando who is both entirely, stereotypically Victorian and at odds with Victorian conventions.

The comedy of *Orlando* arises in part through its mocking presentation of its narrator. If, as some points of the text suggest, this narrator is a historical biographer, he or she is often a laughable one. Though the text includes photographs of its subject and her ancestors and romantic interests—and, after the table of contents, an official-sounding list of illustrations—its photograph of a sixteenth-century Russian princess clearly deviates from historical plausibility. And, as Caroline Webb observes, while it includes a preface whose serious-sounding acknowledgements at first “[mimic] the habitual voice of Victorian biographers so precisely as to be unexceptional” (192), the preface turns out to be a series of jokes. Throughout the novel but particularly in the nineteenth-century passages, the historical voice tends to the absurd. When the narrator develops a theory by which a sudden change in climate produces a new nineteenth-century temperament (227-34), or when the narrator can only, according to biographical conventions and in view of Orlando's behavior, recite the months of a whole year of her life (266), the effect is humorous rather than authoritative, despite or even because of the traditional trappings of historical authority. The ironic treatment of the narrator's persona as historian and biographer works to undermine the authority of those trappings—the index, footnote, preface, and table of illustrations as well as the didactic tone, focus on causation, privileging of action outside the home over thought at one's writing table or

tea table, and obsession with factuality as the most important or only mode of truth.

And yet, as “The New Biography” makes clear, to mock is not quite the same as to reject. There, Woolf famously argues that no biographer has yet been able satisfactorily to represent life, “that queer amalgamation of dream and reality, that perpetual marriage of granite and rainbow” (*Essays* IV: 478). The essay is a review of Harold Nicolson’s<sup>37</sup> *Some People*, and though it is critical, the review contends that “Nicolson with his mixture of biography and autobiography, of fact and fiction, [...] waves his hand airily in a possible direction” of a solution (478). Insofar as his book succeeds, Woolf suggests, it does so by being “extremely amusing,” by laughing at its subjects as well as its author—but with “the laughter of intelligence,” laughter that “mak[es] us take the people he laughs at seriously” (476). Similarly, in *Orlando* as well as in her essays, Woolf’s intelligent amusement extends to herself as interpreter and reader of history. It thus allows her to accept the inadequacy of existing historical forms—both the Victorian and the various reactions against the Victorian—without freezing in her tracks and abandoning historical thought.

On the other hand, Woolf worries that in *Some People*, “The irony with which [the subjects] are treated, though it has its tenderness, stunts their growth,” leaving them “rather below life size” (477). Woolf considers both the promise and the danger of bringing a sense of humor to biography, and of combining fact and fiction: as for the latter, while “Nicolson has shown that a little fiction mixed with fact can be made to transmit personality very effectively” (477), Woolf is also concerned that he appears able “to mix the truth of real life and the truth of fiction [...] only by using no more than a

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<sup>37</sup> Nicolson, a biographer, was the husband of Vita Sackville-West.

pinch of either. For though both truths are genuine, they are antagonistic; let them meet and they destroy each other” (477-8). Clearly these reflections are relevant to her own work in *Orlando*, where irony and mocking accommodate the slipperiness, uncertainty, and inconsistency needed to undermine traditional forms of masculine, universalizing, and absolute intellectual authority in selectively narrating the past and (especially women’s) lives—and where irony and mocking preclude a genuine solution, the proposal of a viable form through which to explore and express the complexity of personality and especially of women’s lives. Woolf questions not only the Victorians but also her own modes of questioning them.

The comedy of *Orlando* plays off and helps produce stereotypes of the Victorian biographer, historian, and novelist, as I discuss in the next section. In “The New Biography,” too, we see humor used to this effect. The essay opens by (mis)quoting Leslie Stephen’s successor as editor of the *Dictionary of National Biography*: “‘The aim of biography,’ said Sir Sidney Lee [...], ‘is the truthful transmission of personality,’ and no single sentence could more neatly split up into two parts the whole problem of biography as it presents itself to us today” (473). She continues in a tone of admiration and graciousness:

For the truth of which Sir Sidney speaks, the truth which biography demands, is truth in its hardest, most obdurate form; it is truth as truth is to be found in the British Museum; it is truth out of which all vapour of falsehood has been pressed by the weight of research. Only when truth had been thus established did Sir Sidney Lee use it in the building of his monument; and no one can be so foolish as to deny that the piles he raised of such hard facts, whether one is called Shakespeare or another King Edward the Seventh, are worthy of all our respect. [...] Truth being thus efficacious and supreme, we can only explain the fact that Sir Sidney’s life of Shakespeare is dull, and that his life of Edward the Seventh is unreadable, by supposing that though both are stuffed with truth, he failed to choose those truths which transmit personality. (473)

Woolf makes clear that both she and Lee see the transmission of personality as the whole point of biography and then mock-innocently wonders how it is that Lee's method, so carefully carried out, completely misses the mark; she characterizes the method bitingly in suggesting that Lee treats people as "piles [...] of hard facts." By making fun of Lee, Woolf stabilizes his work and goes on to characterize "the Victorian biography" in similar terms.

In (sometimes) presenting a correspondingly stuffy and hemmed-in researcher as its narrator, *Orlando* exposes hypocrisy within the authoritative stance of historical biography. As Karin Westman notes, both "The Friendships Gallery" (1907) and *Orlando* present "satiric commentary both on the necessarily imaginative role a biographer plays in re-presenting experience and on the historiographic methods that traditionally mask this subjective view" ("First Orlando" 43). In each text, a narrator writing as a biographer "acknowledges the limitations that censor his<sup>38</sup> narrative, but does so in a way that such limitations appear ill-conceived and hypocritical—indeed, worthy of our laughter" (Westman, "First Orlando" 46). In "The New Biography," Woolf delineates these limitations quite clearly: we have not yet found a satisfactory solution to the challenges of granite and rainbow, but:

Be that as it may we can assure ourselves by a very simple experiment that the days of Victorian biography are over. Consider one's own life; pass under review a few years that one has actually lived. Conceive how Lord Morley would have expounded them; how Sir Sidney Lee would have documented them; how strangely all that had been most real in them would have slipped through their fingers. (478)

Woolf's review is ambivalent, ending with the rather defeated assertion that while the

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<sup>38</sup> Later in this chapter, I discuss—and contest—the straightforward characterization of the narrator as masculine.

‘new biography’ is doomed because “[t]ruth of fact and truth of fiction are incompatible,” we might as well not return to the Victorian biography that ignores “all that had been most real” in life (478). This position of dissatisfaction without solution is well accommodated by *Orlando*’s narrative irony and shapeshifting, by which the novel (unlike the review) can try out a range of modes, critiquing several historical approaches without entirely discarding them, trying out a mixture of fact and fiction without committing to any approach with theoretical, scholarly, or novelistic seriousness. And even though this text uses light humor and a shifting stance to deliver Woolf’s historical-epistemological critique, it proves perfectly capable of a steady position on one point—on that aspect of Victorian historiography which she treats with unabated displeasure during her otherwise quite conflicted career.

### **Writing Women in *Orlando*’s Nineteenth Century**

Woolf’s, and *Orlando*’s, critique of Victorian modes of knowledge and authority is least ambivalent with regard to gender: time and again, she writes (angrily, sadly, cleverly, amusingly) against the exclusion of women from histories and biographies. According to Anna Snaith, “The importance for [Woolf] of the lives of the obscure, and the role of women’s biography and autobiography in ‘publicizing’ women’s experience, cannot be overstated” (42). *Orlando* launches a serious critique of Victorian historiography and biography—as well as realist fiction—as sexist and limiting forms. And as Hoberman notes, Woolf “recognized the huge impact biographies have on the construal of reality, and she bemoaned the absence of women from the biographical record” (14). In realizing the immense public authority of biographical and other

historical writing, Woolf cannot dismiss them—even if she cannot believe in them—because the forms’ significance compels her to work on them, attempting to modify them to make room for women’s lives.

*Orlando* makes such room in part by drawing attention to and unsettling the traditional gendering of the biographic, historical, or novelistic voice of authority as both masculine and universal. Over and over, it enacts that “sudden splitting off of consciousness” described in *A Room of One’s Own*, shifting to render the familiar “alien” and the self-evident questionable (2142). We can see this work clearly, for instance, as the narrator recounts Orlando’s conversation with an eighteenth-century prostitute named Nell. Dressed as a man, Orlando removes her disguise with “anger, merriment, and pity” (217); this truth known, they and a group of other prostitutes “would draw round the Punch bowl [...], and many were the fine tales they told and many the amusing observations they made for it cannot be denied that when women get together—but hist—they are always careful to see that the doors are shut and that not a word of it gets into print” (219). Here, the printed word is the product of men, and the narrator is shut out by the door the women close; their words do not appear in this text. The passage continues, “All they desire is—but hist again—is that not a man’s step on the stair? All they desire, we were about to say when the gentleman took the very words out of our mouths. Women have no desires, says this gentleman, coming into Nell’s parlour; only affectations” (219). While the narrator accepts the statement of “the gentleman” and seems conflated with him in the “male step” that causes the women to shush themselves, the experience of having “the very words [taken] out of our mouths” by a gentleman is a more typically female one: the gentleman silences the women and substitutes his own



words for those of the narrator.

After all this attention to the role of gender in determining knowledge and its limits, the scene draws to a close on what must now be an absurd denial of the question of the narrator's gender. Reflecting on what it is that women do or say alone together, the narrator decides:

As that is not a question that can engage the attention of a sensible man, let us, who enjoy the immunity of all biographers and historians from any sex whatever, pass it over, and merely state that Orlando professed great enjoyment in the society of her own sex, and leave it to the gentlemen to prove, as they are very fond of doing, that this is impossible. (220)

The narrator—aligned for the moment with biographers and historians rather than poets and novelists—is here both masculine and incompletely gendered. He discards a line of inquiry because it does not merit “the attention of a sensible man” but excludes herself from another discussion amongst “the gentlemen.” The narrator's claim to “the immunity of all biographers and historians from any sex whatever” is as laughable as his or her earlier pretense to “let other pens treat of sex and sexuality” (139) in a book whose main character changes sex and carries on countless affairs. The narrator's gender is also changeable, enabling an irony that exposes the masculine perspective underlying mainstream biography's and history's pretenses to disinterested objectivity.

In *Orlando*, such nineteenth-century biographical conventions seem as “antipathetic” to Woolf and her narrator as “the spirit of the nineteenth century” is to Orlando (244). The Victorian age is represented as particularly stifling both to women writing and to the writing of women's experiences and personalities; the connection between these two modes of making history (women writing histories and women acting upon history) is as strong and nearly as explicit here as in *A Room of One's Own*. But

here, the point is performed through a narrator shifting not only amongst individual consciousnesses but amongst discourses and genders. Kathryn Miles further clarifies the role of *Orlando*'s highly visible narrator by suggesting that this voice performs the conventions of authority Woolf sees in various traditions of writing past lives. Miles reads *Orlando* as a creative presentation of the history of biography Woolf sketches at the beginning of "The New Biography," with an Elizabethan biographer-narrator in the Elizabethan chapter, a Boswell-like voice in the eighteenth century, and so forth. In the nineteenth century of "The New Biography," biography "privileges truth of fact and elides personality" (Miles 215). Accordingly, the *Orlando* narrator in the Victorian period "becomes increasingly interested in that which can be empirically accounted for: detailed accounts of legal briefs, invitations, and other bits of tangible proof begin to clutter the pages of the Victorian account of Orlando's life" (Miles 216)—but, Miles observes, even the narrator cannot long abide this approach, which privileges the masculine, the adventures of Great Men over the thoughts and poetry of boring, insignificant ladies whose purpose is to marry and then produce boys who can inherit property and titles.

Just as Orlando has trouble living and writing in the Victorian age, Miles argues convincingly that "it is in this section [...] where the biographer begins his most overt critique and protest of biographical mores" (216), objecting to Victorian constraints on the form. In "The New Biography," Woolf complains that Victorian biographers were "dominated by the idea of goodness. [...] The figure is almost always above life size in top hat and frock coat, and the manner of presentation becomes increasingly clumsy and laborious" (*Essays* IV: 475). But the *Orlando* narrator, following his or her now-female

subject, faces these conventions with eye-rolling annoyance: “It was now November. After November, comes December. Then January, February, March, and April. [...] This method of writing biography, though it has its merits, is a little bare, perhaps” (266). Here, the narrator does not seriously play the scholarly biographer but rather underscores the particularly offensive conventions of Victorian biography through irony. Indeed, the narrator complains of the impossibility of writing an interesting, valuable biography of a subject such as Orlando given these conventions (266-7), drawing attention to the absurdity of what he or she has just written and to the difficulty of writing women’s lives into history as it is told within Victorian scholarly traditions and values.

Like many other critics, though, Miles artificially stabilizes this narrator as “the biographer” and as “he.” Certainly the narrator is sometimes identified as a biographer, and sometimes clearly strikes a masculine pose; by attending to the ways and moments in which the text is composed by a male biographer, Miles and others illuminate *Orlando*’s critique of the biographical conventions of Lee, Morley, and Stephen—conventions that exclude women. The issue is far from merely a scholarly one: Woolf, as Hoberman reminds us, “saw the exclusion of women from historical action as not only reflected but reinforced by the exclusion of women from historical commentary” (134). And yet, the *Orlando* narrator does *not* occupy either position—biographer or man—consistently, and treating him or her as stable oversimplifies the complex ways in which *Orlando* grapples with these problems of historical representation.

If we examine the narrator’s performance as biographer at the expense of those moments in which that stance wavers, we might imagine a novel in which Woolf simply mocks traditional, fact-based historical biography and posits fiction as a freeing

alternative to the binding and misleading conventions of Victorian-style historiography. Instead, as Westman argues, Woolf critiques nineteenth-century traditions of *both* disciplinary history *and* novel-writing in *Orlando* and other works. Woolf, Westman asserts, traces the connection between “history’s official narratives and a corresponding literary realism” (Westman, “Character” 4). She exposes both modes as patriarchal and capitalist in their ‘realism’: “The moral imperative which motivated Thomas Babington Macaulay’s Victorian and G. M. Trevelyan’s Edwardian historiographic projects parallels the didactic goals of the eighteenth- and nineteenth-century novel” (Westman, “Character” 4). *Orlando*’s form, with its slippery narrator, demonstrates that merely filling in the blanks of traditional history with (traditional) historical fiction is inadequate because, in fact, both forms are based in the same Victorian, sexist values and authority.

This fictional historian’s text, by taking the form’s discourse mixing so far as to perform the historian’s role (and *any* role) only in flickers and laughs, thus unsettles the authority of realist fiction, history, *and* biography. The multiplicity of positions claimed by the *Orlando* narrator mocks not only the pretense of objectivity and disinterestedness of the historical biographer’s voice—“the immunity of all biographers and historians from any sex whatever” (220)—but also the epistemic, aesthetic, and moral “authority” claimed by “the male novelists” (269) in the conventions of their realism. Instead of merely supplementing an existing historical and biographical record with additional, alternative, or even imagined data, *Orlando* exists both between and beyond the traditionally complimentary modes of scholarly and fictional history. It uses multiplicity, slipperiness, satire, and irony to suggest the limits of every available mode of historical narrative.

The Victorian appears as the era in which it is most difficult to write a woman's life; it is also the era in which it is most difficult for Orlando, as a woman, to write. It is the most oppressively gendering. In the eighteenth century, Orlando often dresses as a man and takes both male and female lovers, but in the nineteenth even this eccentric bends to gender roles; she blushes at wearing breeches (233), marries, and tops off the era by producing a male heir in the paragraph before the transition into the twentieth century and Edward's reign (296). In *Orlando's* Victorian England, even in reference to the queen, pregnancy is "the fact; the great fact; the only fact" which itself must be hidden modestly under a crinoline (234). Emphasizing the distinctiveness of *Orlando's* approach to this most recent historical period, the image of a pregnant Victoria appears in juxtaposition to a flashback to Queen Elizabeth three paragraphs later. In Orlando's memory, the sixteenth-century queen "stood astride the fireplace with a flagon of beer in her hand, which she suddenly dashed on the table when Lord Burghley tactlessly used the imperative instead of the subjunctive. 'Little man, little man, [...] is 'must' a word to be addressed to princes?'" (235). Elizabeth's authority as a "prince" has been replaced by Victoria's far more passive representation in the text, wearing a wedding ring and then a crinoline and later appearing as a statue. Orlando initially resists the Victorian era's differences from the other periods she has experienced, but she cannot ignore its impact on her own writing.

When she decides to return to her poem "The Oak Tree" in this period, Orlando thinks, "True, Queen Victoria is on the throne and not Queen Elizabeth, but what difference. ..." (237). But as Orlando "dip[s] her pen in the ink," she is interrupted by servants busy with her tea service; "a blot" spreads over the page; "[s]he tried to go on

with what she was saying; no words came” (238). Moments later, she can only write “the most insipid verse she had ever read in her life,” over which she has no control: emphatically in the passive voice, “[h]er page was written” in a hand that is not her own, and when “[a]gain she dipped her pen and off it went” with more nonsense, Orlando can take charge only by pouring ink over the page (238-9). Suddenly painfully aware of the ring finger on her left hand, Orlando buys herself a wedding band and tries to write again, but she once more faces either meaningless ink blots or a pen that “ambled off” into awful verse beyond her control. She thus decides “to yield completely and submissively to the spirit of the age, and take a husband” (243). Finally, Orlando is able to write again, though only because she is safely married and “no satirist, cynic, or psychologist” (266). Her work, especially in reference to sexuality, is now subject to an internalized censor: a “power [...] which had been reading over her shoulder” objects to her reference to “Egyptian girls” but allows it because she “ha[s] a husband at the Cape” (265). Though the narrator claims that Orlando “remained herself” and had successfully compromised enough with “the spirit of the age” to write, Orlando is clearly more aware of what she is permitted to write, think, and feel as a woman in the Victorian era than she has been during the previous centuries of her life. The interruption of writing on the part of domestic life—the servants and tea pot and a ring finger in want of a wedding ring—can only be surmounted by at least an outward “submission” to the domestic, the masculine, and the heterosexual.

It is, after all, during the Victorian era that Orlando “is pronounced indisputably, and beyond the shadow of a doubt [...] Female” (255); the “spirit of the age” cannot abide the indeterminate gender of eighteenth-century Orlando and employs the law to sort

out her appropriate mode of being. Orlando does regain her ability to write and even finally finishes the poem during this era (271). At the same time, as we have seen, her life as a wealthy Victorian woman—cut off from action outside the home, inside writing while her husband sails around Cape Horn—is hardly life worth mentioning at all: “Life, it has been agreed by everyone whose opinion is worth consulting, is the only fit subject for novelist or biographer; life, the same authorities have decided, has nothing whatever to do with sitting still in a chair and thinking” (267). A biographer (or novelist) faced with such an externally inactive subject, and bound by nineteenth-century biographic (or literary) procedures, can only count off the months. In this case, it matters little whether the narrator aspires to the truth of fact or of fiction, since “the authorities” of each mode deem women’s lives outside “life.”

In her 1910 review “‘Modes and Manners of the Nineteenth Century,’” Virginia Stephen places the blame for women’s exclusion from *historical* narrative, at least, firmly upon nineteenth-century men of history. The review briefly exhibits an all-out caricature of the Victorian historian, complete with top hat:

When one has read no history for a time the sad-coloured volumes are really surprising. [...] Wars and ministries and legislation—unexampled prosperity and unbridled corruption tumbling the nation headlong to decay—what a strange delusion it all is!—invented presumably by gentlemen in tall hats in the Forties who wished to dignify mankind. Our point of view they ignore entirely: we have never felt the pressure of a single law; our passions and despairs have nothing to do with trade; our virtues and vices flourish under all governments impartially. The machine they describe; they succeed to some extent of making us believe in it; but the heart of it they leave untouched—is it because they cannot understand it? At any rate, we are left out, and history, in our opinion, lacks an eye. (330)

Women, living outside scholars’ definition of history, are written out of history by “gentlemen in tall hats in the [eighteen] Forties who wished to dignify mankind.” These

men's national narratives of linear development—whether of progress (“unexampled prosperity”) or decline (“unbridled corruption”)—not only disregard but, Woolf suspects, *cannot account for* female lives.

It is in keeping with images such as this one that Ruth Hoberman asserts that, for Woolf as well as for Strachey, “Serving as images of this polarity [between history and women] are two figures, both biographers, husbands, and Victorians: Thomas Carlyle and Leslie Stephen. Biography for Woolf was, above all, the genre of Carlyle, who argued that history was made by ‘Great Men,’ of her father, and, overall, of an exaggerated belief in the power of human will and an oversimplified view of what the self is” (135). Each man “served [...] as a vehicle through which to attack the Victorian age as a whole” (135). But, as I have argued throughout this chapter, Woolf never seriously and steadily launched an unambivalent attack, in part because she also could not accept literary-modernist approaches to the past and in part because she wanted to *use* the authority of recognizable biographical and historical forms—those popular, interesting, factual-sounding, truth-making Victorian works. As Hoberman explains, “she was faced with a dilemma: how could she appropriate the influence and ideological weight carried by biographical writing without either succumbing to its traditional values and methods, or vitiating its effectiveness by losing her audience’s trust?” (133-4). Hoberman’s answer is that, in *Flush* and *Orlando*, Woolf brings together “granite and rainbow but [does] so as a ‘joke’” (134); she “meet[s] her father halfway: accepting his allegiance to the facts halfway, borrowing his narrative persona halfway, imitating his emphasis on gender roles halfway” (146). Such a “halfway,” in-between stance is enabled by a narrator who is both man and woman (and neither), both novelist and historical biographer (and neither),



approaching each stance with ironic distance.

Furthermore, the nonlinearity of Woolf's historical inheritance and her mixture of attraction to and repulsion from Victorian historical authority are not simply concessions. They are not failures in some larger teleological progress from flawed Victorian faith to wise modern skepticism. As Woolf records in her diary even in a mood of annoyance with "The complete Insider," she esteemed the "great service like Roman roads" performed by scholars including Trevelyan and her father; as I have argued above, her own meaningful access to "the forests & the will o the wisps" often depends upon just such roads (*Diary* 333). This career of complex engagement with a historical-epistemological inheritance thus dramatizes the implications of the nonlinearity of historical knowledge—the messiness of history's history for insiders and outsiders alike.

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## CHAPTER THREE

### “A True Historian”:

#### Historical Authority outside History in the Claudius Novels

This chapter turns from Woolf’s self-conscious historical-epistemological questioning to a pair of apparently quite straightforward historical fictions, bestselling novels that take an extremely confident tone and earned their author much-needed cash and lasting fame. Robert Graves’s *I, Claudius* and *Claudius the God* (both 1934). These novels, so distant from the humor and shapeshifting of *Orlando*, allow me to revisit the previous chapter’s preoccupations—with historical authority, the meeting points of factual and fictional discourses, the relationship between fictional historians’ texts and the historiographic debates raging between the wars—from a revealingly different angle. They provide an opportunity to delineate both the flexibility and the limitations of the narrative stance they share with *Orlando*. While the form of the historian’s text makes space for contradictions in both Woolf’s and Graves’s hands, Woolf’s intense engagement with the messiness and nonlinearity of historical knowledge is nowhere to be found in Graves’s Claudius novels. Instead, the layers of historical authority in *I, Claudius* and *Claudius the God* make room for a vision of absolute historical truth.

Whereas Woolf deconstructs specific traditions of historical authority from the perspective of an outsider, able to accept *neither* Victorian historical biography *nor* the different modernisms of history and literature, Graves strives to hold together his own texts’ authority as *both* fiction *and* fact, toward *both* extra-disciplinary *and* specialist

readers. Like Graves's comments in interviews and his theoretical discussions in texts such as *The White Goddess*, the Claudius novels take a didactic approach that asks a great deal of readers. They address readers willing to embrace the authority of scholarly history, to accept Graves's historical authority as authorized by that of the discipline, and not to question Graves's brazen divergence from the discipline's traditions, procedures, and conventions. In this chapter, I argue that Graves's sweeping claims to historical authority rely upon a representation of historical knowledge as ahistorical and unproblematic. I trace tensions within and between the two Claudius novels: tensions between the depiction of historical knowledge as transparent and the highly mediated nature of a fictionally translated and edited text; amongst the contradictory historical traditions Graves combines as though they were in perfect harmony; between absolute confidence and extreme sensitivity to criticism; and between Graves's self-positioning as a novelist and as a historian.

Graves avoids the epistemological challenges and controversy that grip Woolf, in part by avoiding the interpretive disagreements of modern scholars. Thus, when Huw P. Wheldon expresses surprise at Graves's small library while interviewing him in his home, Graves explains:

If you write a historical novel you don't really need many books; you need the original histories, Latin or Greek histories, whatever it may be. The commentaries are not necessary. There are too many commentaries. You can get drowned in commentaries. I have the histories, a lot of dictionaries and reference books and it is simply a matter of throwing myself back into the right period and living very much in that period the whole time I am writing about it. (Kersnowski 51)

He rarely refers to modern commentaries on classical texts, and generally proceeds as though modern histories were quite irrelevant. If Graves's only claim for the Claudius

novels were as entertaining fictions or even as realistic impersonations of their classical ‘author,’ this approach would be perfectly reasonable. Yet, as the final section of this chapter shows, he often insists that these novels tell a historical truth that should be taken seriously by the classicists and historians he blithely ignores.

Graves also avoids the complexity of historical doubt by firmly resisting the historicization of historical knowledge—a historicization not only performed in *Orlando*, but also promoted by many of Graves’s contemporaries within disciplinary history. The Claudius novels flatten historical knowledge into a transparent representation of *the truth*, at a time when many scholars and artists were reimagining historical knowledge as itself historically contingent—and when still others found modernist history’s new scientific approach so compelling that they could simply discount previous historical knowledge. The Claudius novels neither apply history’s methodology to itself in a critical reappraisal of past and present practices, nor privilege the most up-to-date version of history as the best. Instead, they treat the diverse historical discourses of classical historians, Victorian classicists and historians, and modernist historians as fundamentally equivalent in truth standards, procedures, and purposes.

These texts thus perpetuate some of the very assumptions against which we have seen Woolf writing. They naturalize the historical approach that Woolf historicizes and destabilizes in *Orlando* and so many of her other writings, a realist attitude that conveys a factual, objectively knowable past. The Claudius novels imagine an unchanging, common-sense mode of knowing the past—despite Graves’s own unorthodox methodology, his inconsistent though forceful statements regarding historical knowledge, and the enormous questioning of history’s authority both within and outside the discipline

during the decades surrounding the novels' publications. In short, these novels accept as still current and unproblematic what Woolf struggles with as no longer believable yet still powerful: the impression that one *can* simply tell the truth about the past.

Paradoxically, *I, Claudius* and *Claudius the God* invoke a multiplicity of historical discourses—classical, Victorian, and modernist—through a layered narrative structure that *draws attention to* the mediation of historical knowledge even as other aspects of the texts treat that knowledge as transparent. On one level, the Claudius novels claim the historical authority of their eponymous historian narrator: even after he accedes as Roman Emperor, Claudius (10 BCE - 54 CE) portrays himself as fundamentally “a true historian” (462). Yet these novels are not only fictional historians' texts at the diegetic level of Claudius's narration. Mediating Claudius's discourse, Graves enters the text as translator and editor, a modern scholar who re-presents this historical document through paratextual materials including footnotes and genealogical tables. We can thus trace distinct but interwoven claims to authority at the levels of Claudius as narrator (and implied author within the fictional world) and of Graves as implied author (and translator with reference to the fiction of Claudius's authorship). In view of the fascinatingly defensive “Author's Note” to *Claudius the God*, we can also characterize these novels as fictional historians' texts in terms of Graves's self-presentation as a historian as well as or instead of a novelist. Here and in his writings outside the novels, Graves sometimes claims not only aesthetic authority or even (like Woolf and many other extra-disciplinary writers) the authority to critique historians, but also the authority *of* a historian writing scholarly histories.

This chapter works through this multiplicity of historical discourses and historian

figures to illuminate a doomed attempt. Graves's sweeping claims to the authority of disciplinary history prove insatiable partly because of a disconnect between his personally-experienced historical Truth and his contemporaries' research methods, but even more fundamentally because of Graves's desire to span fictional and factual modes of truth as well as disciplinary and extra-disciplinary audiences. In the first two sections, I trace *I, Claudius*'s uses of modernist history, Victorian classicism, and classical history, asserting that the novel's references to multiple historical approaches work to naturalize rather than historicize notions of historical truth. Indeed, it is this universalizing view of historical knowledge that makes possible Graves's sense of entitlement to an unquestioning reception from scholars and general readers alike. I then turn to Graves's stance within the Claudius novels as translator, novelist, and historian, attending to the shift in focus between *I, Claudius* and *Claudius the God*—from the fiction of a rediscovered and translated historical text to Graves's defensive claim that his texts have historical as well as novelistic value. When these texts were first published, British historical knowledge was in the throes of professionalization, and acute interest in the line between fiction and history was shared by groups as otherwise distinct as the historical and literary modernists. Given the climate of British historical thought between the wars, then, Graves's desire to span fictional and factual truths, and general and specialist audiences, could not help but meet with resistance.

### **Robert von Ranke Graves and Modernist History**

Robert Graves's relationship with modernist history begins, like so many accounts of modernist history, with Leopold von Ranke. Ranke not only took a highly



visible role in the nineteenth- and twentieth-century professionalization of history but also was Graves's great-uncle and the source of his middle name. In his early autobiography *Good-bye to All That* (1929), Graves tellingly mentions Ranke in the process of constructing his own narrative authority, claiming: "To him I owe my historical method. It was he who wrote, to the scandal of his contemporaries: 'I am a historian before I am a Christian; my object is simply to find out how the things actually occurred'" (5-6). This biographical connection often surfaces in discussions of *I, Claudius*; readers, and Graves himself, have perceived connections between the novel's classical models of historical knowledge and the more recent historiographic concerns invoked through the shorthand of Ranke's name. In one interview, for instance, Graves responds to a question about *I, Claudius*'s representation of the classical historian Livy by invoking this modernist inheritance, which he represents as unproblematic: "It's sort of a habit in my family, you know. My granduncle was Leopold von Ranke, the so-called 'father of modern history.' He was always held up to me by my mother as the first modern historian who decided to tell the truth in history" (Kersnowski 101). While he ties his own historical authority to Ranke's historical approach, however, Graves remains very far from a methodical, scientific Rankean.

Peter Green thus notes in Graves's references to Ranke "a certain sly irony": while Graves suggests that he (like Ranke) uncovers the truth of history, "Ranke (a methodical rationalist if ever there was one)" would surely object to what Green calls Graves's "cavalier treatment of evidence" (102). The methodological differences between Graves and Ranke are indeed immense. Most colorfully, Graves reports in *The White Goddess* (1948) and elsewhere on his method of the "analeptic trance," in which he casts

his consciousness back in time to overhear (and then record) conversations between historical figures. He also acknowledges the central role of intuition in his pursuit of historical truth, basing his accounts upon feelings such as a “strange confluence between Claudius and myself. I found out that I was able to know a lot of things that happened without having any basis except that I knew they were true” (Kersnowski 100). The contrast between such an approach and Ranke’s rigorous ideal of archival research need hardly be elaborated. Indeed, so far from voicing a genuine methodological or theoretical connection, Graves seems to invoke Ranke precisely to divert attention from his unconventional practices, focusing readers instead on what he sees as the objective historical knowledge they produce.

Within *I, Claudius*, Ranke functions even more problematically. Ranke’s famous description of his historical ideal, history “wie es eigentlich gewesen”—usually translated as something like ‘history as it really happened’—echoes in novel through the historian Pollio’s authoritative voice. In an argument with Livy, Pollio asserts: “History is a true record of what happened, how people lived and died, what they did and said; an epic theme merely distorts the record” (116). The phrase also resonates in the words of dull but eminently accurate Sulpicius when he admires “mere truth-tellers [...] people who record no more than actually occurred” (123). In the voices of classical historians, the values of modernist history are represented anachronistically. At the same time, Claudius’s preference of Pollio’s to Livy’s historical approach aligns him, and thus his narrative, with a desire to avoid anachronism: in the debate Claudius witnesses between these two scholars, Pollio criticizes Livy for “credit[ing] the Romans of several centuries ago with impossibly modern motives and habits and speeches. Yes, it’s readable all right,

but it's not history" (115). Paradoxically, this emphasis on anachronism is probably itself anachronistic; the idea as we know it derives from a post-Enlightenment reaction against history as exemplary and from a nineteenth-century focus on historicity and historical change. But in the world of the Claudius novels, while the style of writing has changed, classical and modernist historical values remain fundamentally unchanged.

So, even as Claudius rejects anachronism and *I, Claudius* presents itself as an authentic artifact (or at least as an 'authentic replica'), it also contains anachronism. It typically violates the realism of its historical setting less in historical details than in language and interpretation: posed as a translation, the text naturally appears in modern English—yet the English of Graves's Claudius is not simply modern. It is, as J. M. Cohen puts it, "modish" (39), the English "of witty, disillusioned, and modern persons" (36). We can see this stylistic anachronism in the differences between *I, Claudius* and Suetonius's *The Twelve Caesars*, one of the novel's classical sources. Such a comparison is even more fruitful because Graves would, in 1957, provide what has remained a standard translation of that text; his departure in *I, Claudius* from Suetonius is apparent even in his own translation, which he renders in modern but decidedly more conventional—less dated—language.<sup>39</sup> Philip Burton perceives this divergence as yet another distinction

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<sup>39</sup> In 1979, Michael Grant was asked to edit Graves's translation to "bring his version inside the range of what is now generally regarded [...] as a 'translation'—without, I hope, detracting from his excellent and inimitable manner" (11). Grant's Foreword displays that tension between two values, "verbal exactitude" and "vivid and compulsive reading" (10), that vexes so many translators. Graves himself appears not to have been bothered with it: "Robert Graves (who explicitly refrained from catering to students) did not aim at producing a precise translation—introducing, as he himself points out, sentences of explanation, omitting passages which do not seem to help the sense, and 'turning sentences, and sometimes, even groups of sentences, inside-out'" (10). In other words, Graves's translation of Suetonius plays, though perhaps less vigorously, with the

between Graves and Ranke when he notes Pollio's Rankean lines, claiming that Graves "credit[s] his characters with motives and habits and speeches which are aggressively, if not impossibly, modern" (209). The novel's modernizing tendency manifests at an interpretive level as well. While Graves's Suetonius writes of a short-lived rebellion that "some divine intervention prevented [the legions] from dressing the Eagles with garlands and perfumes" (193), Graves's Claudius describes the episode in a wryly amused, ironic tone. He provides what modern readers will accept as a more rational explanation: the officers, not the gods, had stage-managed dark omens for their superstitious soldiers (231). Claudius's classical rhetorical gestures construct his narrative as a true history and as a genuine artifact, but Graves's audience bears twentieth-century assumptions about historical truth; *I, Claudius* picks and chooses, existing between these two sets of conventions in its willy-nilly realism.

Accordingly, while Claudius constructs his historical authority through all the conventions of Imperial Rome, he also provides what modern readers will accept as a more stable foundation for his historical authority than his classical appeals. He addresses his most explicit claims to such authority to an audience the historical Claudius could not have imagined: readers educated in a post-Victorian world. Graves's Claudius repeatedly asserts special capacities for objectivity and interpretation on the basis of his status as "a professional historian" (*IC* 8, 339), but as John Marincola reminds us, "historians were never a defined group in antiquity, nor did they have a fixed position: there were no professors of history," such that "the ancient historian was more a man of letters than specifically an historian" (19). Yet Claudius views history as his true "profession" (3),

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same grey area of translation, imitation, and invention as do *I, Claudius* and *Claudius the God*.

which he must strive to protect from his newer position as emperor. In these passages Claudius sounds more like a university-trained, conference-attending modern historian writing his memoirs than like a classical man of letters setting down his secret autobiography. His voice, and its ‘translation’ through Graves’s voice, flatten out historical discourse into a transhistorical mode of reconstructing the truth about the past—Graves’s oversimplification of Ranke’s history “wie es eigentlich gewesen.”

Such a view, by which the knowledge produced by Claudius and other classical historians is more or less the same as the knowledge produced by historians contemporary to Graves, helps explain why Graves often ignores twentieth-century interpretations as unnecessary repetition. When pressed by critics, on the other hand, Graves lists in the “Author’s Note” to *Claudius the God* not only a lengthy list of classical sources but also the most up-to-date scholarly work on Claudius, Arnaldo Momigliano’s *Claudius: The Emperor and his Achievement* (1932; English trans. 1934). Though Graves was likely unfamiliar with Momigliano’s thought outside this text, his mention of this particular historian—a citation which not only gives credit but insists that Graves really has performed thorough historical research—inadvertently underscores the divergence of Graves’s transhistorical understanding of historical knowledge from the work occurring in disciplinary history at the time. Momigliano, an Italian classical historian, spent much of his career studying the history of historiography.<sup>40</sup> He would later write, “The inevitable corollary of historicism is history of historiography as the mode of expressing awareness that historical problems have themselves a history”

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<sup>40</sup> Because Momigliano’s work was well-received amongst British historians, he was able to move as an academic refugee to England in 1939 and support his family through research grants. He spent the rest of his career at Oxford University and the University of Chicago.

("Historicism" 70); in lectures, seminars, essays, and books as well as through his association with the British historical journal *History and Theory*, Momigliano promoted a historicizing view of historiography. Rejecting wholesale relativism, he instead strove to evaluate changing historical methodologies.

As though in direct opposition to Graves's fits of intuition, for which he claimed the authority of rigorous disciplinary history, Momigliano wrote: "Neither common sense nor intuition can replace a critical knowledge of past historians" (*Studies* vii). Like Graves, Momigliano traced intimate connections between classical and twentieth-century historical thought; as Karl Christ summarizes:

contact with the classic masters of historiography should serve not only as the backdrop for the development of modern innovations and perspectives, but should lead first and foremost to the strengthening of the intellectual potential of the discipline, to its vitalization and security in the face of the fashionable trends which threaten from all sides. In [Momigliano's] view, only the safeguarding of the historical foundations and precise knowledge of the history of historiography solidly based on them would ensure the continuation of historical scholarship into the future. (12)

Whereas Momigliano makes careful and critical connections across historiographic periods, though, Graves simply assumes historical truth and its methods to be inherently stable.

In his historical novels, non-fiction writings, and interviews, Graves expresses deep skepticism about conventional historical interpretations such as our received views of Claudius and Jesus. Yet in all these forms he also expresses an extraordinarily confident attitude toward knowing the historical past. We can see this dynamic quite clearly, for instance, in Graves's assertion that "We know now exactly what disease [Claudius] suffered from: Little's disease" (Kersnowski 100). Arising as it does in response to a question about the scarcity of "direct source," the comment both skirts the

fundamental problems of historical knowledge (how and whether we can know about events and people no longer present) and the relationship between historical fiction and historical fact, and assumes that “we” moderns have access to an objective truth about the ancients and their experiences, which they naively misunderstood. Such sentiments help illuminate *I, Claudius*’s use of the historian’s text form, whereby layered and multiple claims to historical authority make room for a “professional historian” before professional history to speak *the truth* across the ages, outside his time’s and position’s limitations.

### **Victorian Classicism and Classical Historical Authority in *I, Claudius***

Unlike professional history and unlike Woolf’s literary modernism, *I, Claudius* approaches historical research in an undisciplined and cheerfully haphazard fashion. Graves did not, like Woolf, plan to be a historian; he did not struggle with the problems of historical knowledge in the way both she and so many historians of the early twentieth century did; and though Graves had earned a scholarship to study classics at St. Johns College, Oxford, before the Great War and did eventually take a degree at Oxford, it was in modern literature rather than any form of history or classical studies. Instead, Graves draws upon his classical education from the nineteenth-century holdover that was his time at Charterhouse, his public school. Though Graves attended Charterhouse from 1909 to 1914, the school arguably reached “the height of its reputation” in the 1820s of William Makepeace Thackeray’s Charterhouse years (Banerjee), and it continued its increasingly anachronistic emphasis on the classics considerably into the twentieth century. Thus, although the singular prestige of classical studies at Oxford and

Cambridge as well as in the public schools—and in British culture outside the educational system—had begun its decline by the end of the nineteenth century, Barry Baldwin characterizes the early 1940s as “a time when proficiency in classics was still, just, regarded as the pinnacle of sixth-form achievement” at the school.

Like history, classical studies changed significantly during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. At the university level, the subject lost its unquestioned place at the heart of education as the sciences and other humanities (including modern history and literary studies) began asserting their own importance.<sup>41</sup> Simultaneously, classical studies itself shifted from a long-standing linguistic approach to a more historical and in some cases archaeological one, as scholars shifted from an overwhelming emphasis on classical rhetoric to greater interest in classical texts’ subject matter and historical embeddedness. Furthermore, whereas classics had been studied by a comparatively broad spectrum of British boys and young men during the eighteenth century (when the field formed the core of education), the nineteenth century saw an increasing split between elite, classics-centered public schools on one hand, and grammar schools and private schools on the other. In response to pressure from the many middle-class families who considered the classics impractical, these latter categories of schools decreased attention to or simply cut Greek and even Latin from their curricula; classical knowledge thus increasingly acted as

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<sup>41</sup> John Kenyon observes: “As the careers of men like Macaulay, Carlyle and Froude show, there was an enormous appetite for history in Victorian England, and a new belief in its importance. The movement for university reform in general at last forced modern history into the degree syllabus, and as the century progressed it was to make serious encroachments on the classics in the field of what we would now call ‘liberal arts’ studies, though well on into the twentieth century classics continued to dominate the curricula of the independent schools which provided most of the Oxford and Cambridge entry” (144). For more on these developments, see M. L. Clarke (113-27) and W. B. Stephens (114-32).



a class marker (Clarke 85-92). In combination with his years of intense classical training at school, Graves's lack of classical and historical training at the university level impacts *I, Claudius* quite visibly—though this impact is dramatically different from that of Woolf's lack of university training on *Orlando*. Whereas Woolf's exclusion from the scholarly disciplines forms part of her outsider perspective, Graves's separation from disciplinary ways of studying the past leaves him even more firmly an insider, by allowing him permanent residence in a happily elitist state of epistemological confidence and simplicity.

Graves did not embrace this education with open arms. According to *Good-bye to All That*, he was miserable during much of his time at Charterhouse, and earlier in his schooling he remembers being taught Latin without “know[ing] what Latin was or meant” (*Good-bye* 25)—in other words, being taught through a firmly linguistic early-nineteenth-century approach that left out context and substance. Cohen argues that “Graves's approach to the classical past is that of one bored by fourteen years of conventional linguistic training who wished to make a fresh approach for himself and was not afraid of iconoclasm” (34); this claim usefully draws attention both to Graves's lengthy and highly traditional classical training and to his departure from the traditions in which he was raised and educated. This is, after all, the man who said “good-bye to all that” in an angry and incendiary farewell to the English culture he found so false and restrictive. Yet Graves carried his familiar mode of historical inquiry with him to Majorca.

Despite his discontent with it, Graves's classical training lies at the base of *I, Claudius*, which revives that most traditional of Latin and Greek assignments: an original

composition in the style of a classical authority. Of course, the novel subverts this form in ‘imitating’ the writing of someone from whom virtually no language has survived, and by imitating it in a modern English ‘translation’ rather than in the ‘original’ Greek. But even given Graves’s iconoclasm and experimentation, *I, Claudius* and its sequel work out of a Victorian respect for the classics and *not* in intimate relation to the cutting-edge scholarly methods or momentous historiographic debates of the modernist (or even the late Victorian) period.<sup>42</sup>

For instance, instead of striving for—and/or agonizing over the impossibility of—modernist objectivity in the style of the natural sciences, *I, Claudius* substitutes a classical value: impartiality. Graves’s references to Ranke outside the text, and the classical historians’ Rankean echoes in the novel, imply that modernist objectivity and classical impartiality are equivalent. But the concepts diverge quite meaningfully: whereas classical historians emphasize fairness of judgment rather than a *lack* of judgment, modernist historiography rejects moral judgment, turning to an ideal of knowledge for knowledge’s sake.<sup>43</sup> In its treatment of historical values such as these, *I,*

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<sup>42</sup> Nor do the novels participate in the turn against Victorian historicism that characterizes certain strains within literary modernism. Graves shared with the literary modernists an interest in the ancient past as it has survived into the twentieth century, which is to say, an interest in fragments and myths. Yet, in keeping with his constant railing against literary modernism as it has come to be understood, he differs from its practitioners in his approach to such remnants. Ian Firla usefully contrasts Eliot and Joyce—“shuffling the fragments about and playing with their incompleteness”—with Graves and his desire for “wholeness, completeness, and closure,” calling the latter attitude “a product of a late-nineteenth century historical education that sought a totalizing vision of human history” (30). In his *Claudius* novels, certainly, readers are offered realist historical narrative and confident interpretation rather than the unsettling sense that we can never truly know the past.

<sup>43</sup> For more on this distinction between classical impartiality and modernist objectivity, see Bentley 7 and Greenwood 111.

*Claudius* employs classical conventions of historical authority in a way that flattens historical distance, rather than illuminating either connections across or differences between various moments in historical thought.

The novel situates itself within classical historical thought from the very beginning. Even before its preface with its claims to “Classical correctness” (x), the text opens with an epigraph invoking the authority of Tacitus (c. 55 – c. 117 CE), one of Graves’s main sources for the material of the *Claudius* novels. While this passage warns readers of the fallibility of the historical record and of the potential for the manipulation of historical facts, it also sets the scene for *Claudius*’s claim to a privileged stance from which to detect and pass on the truth:

... A story that was the subject of every variety of misrepresentation, not only by those who lived then but likewise in succeeding times: so true is it that all transactions of preeminent importance are wrapt in doubt and obscurity; while some hold for certain facts the most precarious hearsays, others turn facts into falsehood; and both are exaggerated by posterity.

If Tacitus is correct, the writer who can shed light on this story will have witnessed those “transactions of preeminent importance” and yet have little reason to falsify the facts.

Enter the Emperor *Claudius*, who addresses “an extremely remote posterity” hoping “that you, my eventual readers of a hundred generations ahead, or more, will feel yourselves directly spoken to, as if by a contemporary: as often Herodotus and Thucydides, long dead, seem to speak to me” (5). *Claudius* unites classical and modernist historical knowledge through the unmediated communication claimed here for gifted historians; historical truth is thus understood not as historically contingent but as universal.

The novel’s many references to recognizable classical historians serve to bolster the authority both of *Claudius* and of *I, Claudius*, and to indicate a classical system of

imitation and influence in which the text can then participate. The novel opens with the Tacitus epigraph and closes with the newly-minted emperor musing about Pollio's and his own histories' audiences and merits; in between, Livy and Pollio appear as characters and argue about historical methodology, and Claudius refers to the histories of Athenodorus, Thucydides, and others—asserting both his own and Graves's intimate familiarity with them. Both Claudius and Graves employ historiographic imitation as a mode of constructing historical authority, which thus crosses the levels of the text to bolster its various claims as artifact, reconstruction, and impartial interpretation. This gesture is a classical rather than a modernist one; as Marincola explains, “conservative and [...] consciously classicising” ancient historiography “had as its central technique the employment of *mimesis*, the creative imitation of one's predecessors” (12).

While Claudius primarily imitates the style and methodology of various historians, however, Graves imitates both form and content in retelling Claudius's secret memoir and its apparent classical sources, Suetonius's *The Twelve Caesars* and Tacitus's *Annals*. Both Claudius novels borrow extensively from Suetonius in content, lifting many episodes almost directly and using Suetonius's interesting asides as prompts for fictionalization; they also mimic his style, constantly departing from chronology in an effort to represent causality and human character more effectively. Such imitation contributes to what Robert Canary calls the novels' “air of authenticity” (4): as Canary argues, “By being true to the tone and facts of his sources, Graves achieves an air of realism lost in many a carefully-plotted historical novel” (Canary 7). The novels' mimesis of classical mimesis participates in their careful (re)construction of classical historical authority.

Claudius's gestures toward historical authority participate in the conventions of his age considerably beyond—though necessarily always within the framework of—his (and Graves's) emphasis on the imitative. Like virtually all historians writing in the period, for example, our narrator claims historical authority through the promise that his history relies upon his own personal search for the truth. Indeed, his position as emperor and his autobiography's secret status allow Graves's Claudius to make this claim in its ideal form: unlike many authors, he has the opportunity to perform the full range of first-hand research, from reading—with access not just to publicly available sources but also to closed archives—to personally witnessing and even taking part in major political events. Especially in *I, Claudius*, he spends long passages showing readers his hours of reading as well as his contact with the world he describes. Indeed, Claudius emphatically displays each of the major markers of authority Marincola identifies in the ancient historians: experience, social status, effort, danger, and impartiality.

Assertions of risk and fairness had become increasingly significant during the period of *I, Claudius*'s supposed composition and are central to the novel. While historians enjoyed considerable freedom of information and expression under the Republic, the administration of the Roman Empire often involved secret meetings and one-sided, official, unverifiable reports; operating under a single authority, officials and scholars alike were increasingly pressured to please that individual with their accounts. Claudius, of course, claims the status of insider and professes to hand on the privileged knowledge that will be missing from other, future histories of his family and reign. He then downplays the resulting impression of bias with recourse to other modes of constructing authority. In a paragraph treating his historical method, for instance,

Claudius displays his effort through language emphasizing labor: he “spent [his] leisure time” in “study,” “busy” performing “tasks” of which he would “tire,” and describes himself as “too careful a writer”; he also invokes his travels and use of multiple sources, implying his impartiality by describing his efforts to read “accounts by writers of rival political parties” (264). While Graves’s epigraph alludes to the problems of writing under the empire, the following narrative solves that problem, drawing upon Claudius’s privileged access to illuminate what for less well-placed historians necessarily remained “wrapt in doubt and obscurity.”

The novel’s easy solution to its setting’s historical-epistemological challenges also draws on Claudius’s distant intended audience, whose situation in the future both increases the appearance of his impartiality and allows him to speak historical truth outside inconvenient historical limitations. As I have already noted, the Claudius novels make much of impartiality, a value that overlaps conveniently with the modernist ideal of objectivity. Claudius’s repeated choice of Pollio over Livy as a historical model is itself a claim to superior impartiality, at least as an ideal toward which he laboriously and conscientiously strives; the novel depicts Pollio as motivated by a desire to tell the truth, and Livy as driven by popular success and admiration.<sup>44</sup> In proving his impartiality, Claudius even refrains from publishing his most deeply-felt works during his lifetime,

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<sup>44</sup> An appearance of impartiality is vital in the autobiography’s ‘original’ rhetorical context as well as in its appeal to Graves’s readers, since ancient (especially Roman) historians understood bias as strongly obstructive to truth. Yet as the Claudius novels imply, the Roman insistence on impartiality has its variations: most notably and relevantly in Livy and his unconcealed love of Rome. Even Livy’s explicit national bias operates in the context of a larger claim to be, as he was later described, “honest” and “fair-minded” (Marincola 170)—he avoided, for instance, the habits of treating individuals in a positive or negative light, and of simply vilifying all of Rome’s enemies (171).

declining to seek with these works the scholarly regard in which he so clearly revels.<sup>45</sup> *I, Claudius* and *Claudius the God* are thus framed as disinterested through passionately true messages-in-a-bottle, which are bound to arrive in the hands of historians safely removed from Imperial Rome's threats to historical truth—the hands of twentieth-century historians who naturally share Claudius's historical values but are now free from the extra-disciplinary restrictions imposed upon historiography in his time.

### **From *I, Claudius* to *Claudius the God*: The Demands of Absolute Authority**

In the opening pages of his secret autobiography, Claudius establishes that he writes “directly” to the twentieth century readers prophesied to him by the Sibyl of Cumae (5, 7). The Claudius novels' layering of their original and prophetically projected rhetorical situations makes room for two normally contradictory strains to coexist and feed off each other. Claudius's historical message in a bottle, like Pollio's and Sulpicius's versions of ‘history as it really happened,’ suggest that the values of “a true historian” have always been fundamentally what they remain in 1934. Yet at the same time, Graves can assume an epistemological position superior to that of Claudius and his contemporaries by emphasizing the inhospitality of Imperial Rome to historical truth. Claudius claims a special authority in the present work in contrast to the works he could safely publish during his lifetime—and in particular contrast to his (now lost) public autobiography, in which, he claims, “I told no lies, but neither did I tell the truth in the

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<sup>45</sup> The decision Graves imagines is not unprecedented—Cicero and the elder Pliny both delayed publication of works until after their own deaths to avoid any suspicion of partiality or the desire for personal gain—but, as Marincola notes, it was an unusual historian who was willing to abandon “the chance of fame in his lifetime,” which for many was a main point of writing history in the first place (172).

sense that I mean to tell it here” (5): the ‘professional historians’ may have been the same, but their ability to transmit the truth was compromised. Furthermore, in the paratextual elements through which Graves carefully constructs and controls the texts—his author’s notes and footnotes, *I, Claudius*’s epigraph, and *Claudius the God*’s appendices, as well as his later statements outside the texts—we encounter a modern consciousness that claims access to a greater realism than Claudius could possibly have accomplished.

Graves’s dehistoricized view of historical truth is thus combined with a teleological understanding of historical knowledge. Together, these premises allow Graves a stance of absolute historical authority, a claim to tell the unchanging and unquestionable truth about the past to nonspecialist and specialist audiences alike. His representation of historical discourse as varying in style but easily translatable across centuries also facilitates his alignment of his own textual presence with that of professional scholars rather than with Woolf’s extra-disciplinary ‘common reader.’ In this section, I examine Graves’s demanding stance toward readers through the lens of the differences many reviewers and critics note between *I, Claudius* and its sequel, *Claudius the God*. Especially in the shift between the first and second novels’ author’s notes, we can see the *fiction* of a translated ancient history crack under the pressure of critical reactions to the *historical* value of *I, Claudius*. Graves’s increasing defensiveness makes visible the unavoidable tension between, on one hand, his claims to a universal historical truth that is both novelistic and factual, and, on the other, the historical-epistemological ideas current amongst his readers.



In Woolf's *Orlando*, the implied author and reader are joined by humor directed at the narrator and at various historical discourses; we are positioned together as non-specialists and outsiders. This ironic distance between historian narrator and author/reader serves as a useful contrast as we approach the less self-conscious and therefore less evident relationships amongst Claudius, the Graves of the paratextual elements, and their implied readers. In the Claudius novels, unlike in *Orlando*, not only the historian narrator but also the implied author/translator takes a didactic tone. Within and with regard to these texts, Graves presents himself as a scholar, most obviously by inserting himself into the text as the editor and translator who signs himself "R. G."—but also in tying himself intimately to the historian Claudius. This connection is apparent in the "Author's Note" to *Claudius the God*, where claims for the novels' historical accuracy implicitly endorse Claudius's honesty and competence as a historian; more dramatically, it surfaces again in Graves's later methodological comments about that "strange confluence between Claudius and myself" (Kersnowski 100). Graves thus positions himself as an epistemological insider, with privileged access to historical truth, and as an erudite teacher vis-à-vis his readers and our more limited knowledge. Such a stance has proven quite effective toward general audiences; *I, Claudius*'s popular success was immediate and enduring.<sup>46</sup> Yet, while Graves habitually described his historical

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<sup>46</sup> *I, Claudius* was translated into at least seventeen languages and has not yet gone out of print (Seymour-Smith 232, Cohen 34). Martin Seymour-Smith outlines its immediate and lasting success: "In England the book had reached a third impression before the end of its month of publication, and a ninth (large one) by October 1935 [...] and when Penguin released their second edition to coincide with the television series in 1976, it was on the best-seller lists for over a year" (232). Clearly *I, Claudius* has resonated with the historical assumptions and values of a massive audience, even as it glosses over the epistemological crises that so worried Woolf and many others during the period of its publication.

novels as mere potboilers, his “Author’s Note” to the sequel expresses immense annoyance at not being taken quite seriously by specialists as well.

In his increasingly defensive posture between the paratexts of *I, Claudius* and *Claudius the God*, we can see Grave’s frustrated and often frankly surprised difficulty in establishing the wide-ranging intellectual authority he wishes to extend toward his general *and* specialist readers. Working out of a belief in a dehistoricized historical truth, to which he *knows* he has unmediated access, Graves sees disciplinary and extra-disciplinary knowledge as equivalent; he expects the appreciation of classicists and historians just as Claudius anticipates the gratitude of “historians of the future” (*IC* 234). Graves complains: “Some reviewers of *I, Claudius* [...] suggested that in writing it I had merely consulted Tacitus’s *Annals* and Suetonius’s *Twelve Caesars*, run them together, and expanded the result with my own ‘vigorous fancy.’ This was not so; nor is it the case here” (*CTG* vii-viii). After listing twenty-four authors and groups he consulted while writing *Claudius the God*, he continues: ““Few incidents here given are wholly unsupported by historical authority of some sort or other and I hope none are historically incredible. No character is invented” (viii). Next, in an echo of a scholarly history’s methodological preface, he recounts the difficulties he navigated in answering three historical questions involving scanty documentation (a battle in the Roman invasion of Britain, and British Druidism) or loaded interpretive debates (early Christianity, a topic in which Graves would embroil himself less cautiously in his 1946 *King Jesus*). This shift to a defensive posture requires Graves to abandon the fiction of *I, Claudius* and its “Author’s Note,” in which Graves had played translator rather than historian.

Beyond its heading, the preface to *I, Claudius* might conceivably serve as a translator's rather than an author's note. Graves's decisions to modernize dates, place names, and the names of historical figures, his search for "suitable renderings for military, legal, and other technical terms," his assertion that the translation's style is in keeping with that of Claudius's (other) surviving language, and his reminder that its original Greek "is a far more conversational language than Latin" might all refer to the work of Graves's many actual translations. The note's reference to the *Twelve Caesars* abdicates his own responsibility for any aesthetic flaws in what he posits as, if not a translation, an impersonation:

Suetonius in his *Twelve Caesars* refers to Claudius's histories as written 'ineptly' rather than 'inelegantly.' Yet if certain passages of the present work are not only ineptly written but also somewhat inelegantly too—the sentences painfully constructed and the digressions awkwardly placed—this is not out of keeping with Claudius's literary style as exhibited in his Latin speech about the Aeduan franchise, fragments of which survive. (x)

While much of the material of this preface is repeated in that of the sequel, *Claudius the God's* "Author's Note" cannot be read as a "Translator's Note": there, Graves-the-novelist and/or Graves-the-historian rejects critics' idea that he has merely rehashed a classical source or two. Whereas in *I, Claudius*, Graves seems to discover and translate a secret history, in *Claudius the God* he invokes the different authority of synthesis and creation, departing defensively from his fiction to claim the narrative as his own in the face of real-world criticism.<sup>47</sup> Accordingly, though Graves does not acknowledge this

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<sup>47</sup> The footnotes, signed with Graves's initials, also shift in purpose between the two novels. This version of the historiographic paratext appears only twice in *I, Claudius*, each time clarifying whether Claudius intends the Nero who would later rule Rome or Germanicus's son by the same name (290, 432). *Claudius the God*, in keeping with its presentation as history rather than as translation or artifact, is more widely annotated; its six footnotes indicate that a given character will later reign as emperor or otherwise

difference, *Claudius the God* focuses largely on Claudius's publicly-recorded works as emperor rather than on a secret history that supplements and corrects contemporary and later historians' accounts. In its effort to accomplish the authority of fact, it seems to overstretch itself and lose its own fictional premise, that of Claudius's privileged but censored access to historical truth.

Throughout, *I, Claudius* foregrounds Claudius's telling of the story, as when he comments on his practice of noting dates in the margin of his narrative (9) and repeatedly refers to the paper on which he writes (52, 189)—and beyond lending focus to an otherwise diffuse narrative, *I, Claudius*'s related emphases on Claudius's authorship and on imitation bolster Graves's position of authority. When Claudius is asked to choose between Pollio and Livy "as a model" for his own historical work, readers are reminded that, if Claudius is writing in the style of Pollio, Graves too is writing in the style of Claudius; the novel's status as imitation is underscored again when Livia writes an official document "in Augustus's own literary style; which was easy to imitate because it always sacrificed elegance to clarity" (80). This suggestion echoes and reinforces the assurance of the "Author's Note" that any inelegance or ineptness in *I, Claudius*, far from reflecting poorly on Graves, only proves the accuracy of his translation or imitation. And in reminding us of the mimetic nature of this ventriloquizing history, all of these passages work to construct the narratives as 'authentic replicas,' operating within the classical convention of mimesis.

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identify a historical figure (153, 286, 519), direct readers to the Christian bible as a historical authority (491), and comment upon translation (509, 524). At the same time, the randomness and scantiness of *Claudius the God*'s annotation (in comparison to the extensive footnotes of contemporary disciplinary histories) reflect Graves's distance from mainstream historical practices.

In *Claudius the God*, however, the “Author’s Note” asserts a historian’s rather than a translator’s or ventriloquist’s authority. Its final pages stretch beyond Claudius’s life and voice to include multiple accounts of his death: excerpts from Philemon Holland’s translation of Suetonius’s *Claudius*, the Oxford translation of Tacitus’s *Annals*, Cary’s translation of Dio Cassius’s account of Claudius’s death, and Graves’s own translation of Lucius Annaeus Seneca’s *The Pumpkinification of Claudius, a Satire in Prose and Verse*. Far from Claudius’s consciousness, the novel ends with a “Sequel” offering the finality of a perspective from the far future, and then a genealogical table of “The Royal Family of the Herods”; the novel ends, in other words, in the voice of Graves-as-historian. The body of the text also departs from a focus on Claudius’s authorship; so much so that Graves, without explanation, inserts a proclamation and “Surviving fragments of Claudius’s speech to the Senate” (435-9) into the narrative. This documentation is included by a twentieth-century historian rather than by Claudius himself; even setting aside these passages’ use of the third person in contrast to Claudius’s usual first-person pronouns, a future perspective is unavoidable in the phrase “Surviving fragments.” After a chapter break, the narrative simply proceeds in Claudius’s voice; the disjunctions of this passage, and their unnerving difference from all the preceding material, suggest the tensions just under the surface of *Claudius the God*’s bid for both novelistic and historical status.

Graves often seems conflicted regarding the exact status of the Claudius novels as history and/or fiction. On one hand, to invoke Ranke is also to invoke a particular understanding of the relationship between historiography and fiction: the modernist understanding that absolutely opposes the two, requiring the good historian simply to ‘tell

the truth.’ In keeping with this tradition, Graves has Claudius claim proudly, as he closes *I, Claudius*, that he has hardly had to fictionalize even dialogue in his account; he chooses Pollio and his unvarnished truth over Livy and his literary effects, after all. On the other hand, we are also shown Caligula—as far as possible from a reliable or sympathetic figure—taking this preference to its extreme by threatening to kill Livy along with all the poets, agreeing with Plato that they are “all liars” (*IC* 435). And even more problematically, a Rankean separation of history and fiction is simply untenable in this piece of historical fiction that claims to tell the truth.

When Buckman and Fifield ask about Graves’s intentions “as a novelist” with regard to the ending of *Claudius the God*, he rejects the label: “I didn’t think I was writing a novel. I was trying to find out the truth of Claudius. [...] It’s a question of reconstructing a personality” (100). Yet at other moments his description of his research and writing process emphasizes the Claudius novels’ status as historical *novels* rather than scholarly histories. When Graves explains that he only needs a small library because really “it is simply a matter of throwing myself back into the right period and living very much in that period” (52), his example comes from *I, Claudius*:

When I was writing Claudius there was an account of a battle [...] and very little information could be got from the source books, so I had to invent, and I invented. [...] Afterwards I was complimented by, I think, *The Times* on having read a book which I didn’t even know existed. [...] I was very pleased when I got a large-scale map to find that the British camp was just where I expected it would be. (52)

In this anecdote, Graves asserts both the novelist’s privilege to invent and the historian’s claims of research, effort, and accuracy. He seems to delight in the brazenness of his fictionalizing, the seamlessness with which it merges with historical fact, *and* the late-coming documentary evidence that supports his version of the story—a version he treats

more as historical theory than as fiction.

Graves's statements on his historical novels' relationship to historical fact seem blissfully unconcerned about their own contradictions. They are serenely problematic and, like his descriptions of his historical methodology and authority, sound remarkably overconfident to a reader relying upon the procedures of disciplinary history. In the "Historical Commentary" that follows his 1946 novel *King Jesus*, for instance, Graves refers to his efforts in both primary and secondary research but asserts earnestly: "refraining even from a bibliography, which would be more impressive than helpful, I undertake to my readers that every important element in my story is based on some tradition, however tenuous, and that I have taken more than ordinary pains to verify my historical background" (420). Such comments underscore Graves's sense of entitlement to readers' absolute faith, our willingness to suspend scrutiny.

It is in this attitude that Graves complains in his foreword to a later edition of *The White Goddess*, the 1946 work in which he describes his historical method of the "analeptic trance":

[N]o expert in ancient Irish or Welsh has offered me the least help in refining my argument, or pointed out any of the errors which are bound to have crept into the text, or even acknowledged my letters. I am disappointed, though not really surprised. The book does read very queerly: but then of course a historical grammar of the language of poetic myth has never previously been attempted, and to write it conscientiously I have had to face such 'puzzling questions, though not beyond all conjecture,' as Sir Thomas Browne instances in his *Hydriotaphia*: 'what song the Sirens sang, or what name Achilles assumed when he hid himself among the women.' I found practical and unevasive answers [...]. But it is only fair to warn readers that this remains a difficult book, as well as a very queer one, to be avoided by anyone with a distracted, tired or rigidly scientific mind. I have not cared to leave out any step in the laborious argument, if only because readers of my recent historical novels have grown a little suspicious of unorthodox conclusions for which the authorities are not always quoted. (9)

Graves claims historical authority on the basis of his ‘labor’ in writing the book, and dismisses as lazy or ‘rigid’ those scholars who criticize or ignore it. In an escalation that echoes the shift in tone from the author’s note of *I, Claudius* to that of *Claudius the God*, the “Postscript 1960” is even more outrageously defensive: it asserts that the author “avoid[s] participation in witchcraft, spiritualism, yoga, fortune-telling, automatic writing, and the like” and “belong[s] to no religious cult, no secret society, no philosophical sect; nor do I trust my historical intuition any further than it can be factually checked” (488). These claims display Graves’s desire to be seen as rational and for his historical writings to be seen as ‘factual,’ alongside his injured awareness that he and his writings seem rather far-fetched to many readers.

They also help us to see the wide chasm between Graves’s procedures of knowing the past, on one hand, and those of disciplinary history, on the other. Graves’s refusal to accept an extra-disciplinary status or audience, his need for scholars to accept his theories and statements as methodologically equivalent or even superior to their own, places him in an impossible position in the Claudius novels as in *The White Goddess*. Like Woolf, Graves pursues historical truth through fictional and factual discourses alike, but very much unlike Woolf, Graves appears unconcerned about the possibility or effects of claiming both “the truth of real life and the truth of fiction” (Woolf 477). Instead, he dehistoricizes scholarship and imagination at a historical moment when not only Woolf but also historians such as Momigliano were carefully and critically historicizing historiography. And while both Graves and Woolf place themselves far outside modernist disciplinary history through their faith in a “truth of fiction” and through their fictional voicings of historians’ discourses, Graves continues to see himself as an insider to



historical knowledge of all forms and is seriously annoyed whenever scholars respond out of other assumptions.

By treating classical, Victorian, and modernist historical authority and conventions as though their differences were purely stylistic rather than methodological or ideological, the Claudius novels deemphasize the domination and exclusion that take center stage in Woolf's work on Victorian historical thought. Yet they prove unable simultaneously to speak a historian's voice and avoid the problems of mediation and authority in historical discourses—unable to skirt historical and literary modernisms' challenges to a simple assertion of the true narrative of past events. In this sense, though published half a century apart, Graves's Claudius novels and John Fowles's historical novel *A Maggot* (1985) struggle similarly within the form of fictional historians' texts. Like Graves's voice in *I, Claudius* and *Claudius the God*, the Fowles who writes himself into *A Maggot* desperately wants to envision historical knowledge and its relationship with fiction as unproblematic, and to avoid contemporary historical debates and doubt. And also like the Claudius novels, *A Maggot* proves unable to evade these troublesome controversies. Yet, as the next chapter shows, the similar-but-different context of historical thought in era of *A Maggot*'s publication allows (and indeed imposes) a different sort of exchange between history and fiction from that I have described in either Woolf's or Graves's writings. Chapter four and the remainder of this dissertation turn to fictional historians' texts that engage—however reluctantly—the historical-epistemological context of the Thatcherite years.

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## CHAPTER FOUR

“How Little This is a Historical Novel”:

Barricading History and Fiction in *A Maggot*

Even a brief summary of John Fowles’s 1985 *A Maggot* suggests the degree to which this novel enacts a postmodernist approach to history: a shift from Truth to truths, a self-consciousness about perspective and methodology, and a weakening of modernist confidence in the ultimate accessibility of the truth about the past. In the novel, four men and a woman travel through eighteenth-century England. Two of the men split off from the group, and the remaining travellers reach a cave in the unpopulated countryside, from which one man never emerges; the other runs from the cave and is later found hanged, and the woman walks out with a new faith in Christ. *A Maggot* performs three inquiries into this case. Most obviously, the majority of the novel comprises transcribed depositions performed by Henry Ayscough, an eighteenth-century lawyer whose noble employer wants to find out what happened to his son, the disappeared man known to his fellow-travellers as Mr. Bartholomew but never properly named in the text. Another inquiry is launched by the novel’s twentieth-century narrative consciousness, which compiles a range of archival sources—depositions, letters, newspaper excerpts—and comments upon the documents, their composition, and their historical context. A third is encouraged in readers ourselves, as we encounter this partial and pointedly constructed archive and are encouraged to read it as a historical murder mystery, looking for clues and sorting through conflicting accounts in a search for the truth about the (imagined)

past. All three inquiries are frustrated—neither character nor narrator nor reader can find out ‘what happened’—and in the process, *A Maggot*’s form and content fundamentally question the possibility and purpose of historical knowledge.

Yet the novel is framed by its author’s voice in a prologue and epilogue that deny any such postmodernist questioning. Before we meet the travellers, readers are instructed in our interpretation of both title and text: “A maggot is the larval stage of a winged creature; as is the written text, at least in the writer’s hope. But an older though now obsolete sense of the word is that of whim or quirk. [...] What follows may seem like a historical novel; but it is not. It is maggot.” After the body of the novel, which as I argue below launches a thoroughgoing exploration of historical knowledge and doubt, the epilogue again and even more anxiously insists that *A Maggot* has nothing to do with history: “It may be that books and documents exist that might have told me more of [the historical people on whom certain characters are based] in historical terms than the little I know: I have consulted none, nor made any effort to find them. I repeat, this is a maggot, not an attempt, either in fact or in language, to reproduce known history” (449). But even as the prologue and epilogue form a skin to keep inside in and outside out, to delineate whimsical maggot from historical world and mystery from the objectively knowable past, the text continually destabilizes and violates such a separation of fiction from history.

This chapter argues that, trapped in a dichotomy that it knows to be false, *A Maggot* is permeated on every level with the tension between a simple-minded history of unproblematic access to facts, and a radical denial of historical knowledge. It sets up an either/or choice between a factual and a mystic relationship with historical time, but although at various points it attempts to endorse each approach, the text is ultimately

unable to accept either one. This compulsive motion toward an untenable dichotomy illustrates and—whether Fowles admits it or not—engages in a number of highly divisive and related debates about history that raged at the time of *A Maggot*'s 1985 publication. These arguments posed questions about what and how we can and ought to learn from history, questions that are raised with timeliness in *A Maggot*. In the public arena of journalism and politics (as well as in many scholarly treatments), these debates often operated in the logic of all or nothing. This chapter explores the multiple levels on which *A Maggot* performs and attempts to work within the limiting terms of perfect objectivity *or* unchecked mysticism, historical facts *or* the human procedures of historical knowing, blind acceptance of precedent *or* equally blind denial of tradition. Ultimately, *A Maggot*'s epistemic dilemma remains as unresolved as its mystery plot; unable to imagine a middle ground of questioning but not destroying historical knowledge, the novel cannot settle on either pole as viable.

In this chapter, I first compare *A Maggot* and Fowles's earlier *The French Lieutenant's Woman* in order to illustrate the shift that occurs between the two texts. Because the two novels share formal features—each set in a detailed historical context, narrated by a didactic twentieth-century voice, and rich with echoes of its setting's literary conventions—their differences help us trace the conceptual changes surrounding historical knowledge that took place between their 1969 and 1985 publications. I then examine *A Maggot*'s prologue and epilogue, so anxious to separate the novel from history. The second section establishes connections between *A Maggot* and three areas of impassioned historical debate in the 1980s: the heritage wars, the 'Great History Debate' over the place of history in the schools, and the rise of postmodernist critiques of

modernist or ‘proper’ history.

Finally, I turn to the novel’s multiple historian figures, including the narrator, the reader, Ayscough, his clerk John Tudor, and the sole female traveller, prostitute-turned-Dissenting-Christian Rebecca Hocknell Lee. I read Ayscough and Rebecca<sup>48</sup> as polarized figures for two ways of approaching the past: absolute historical knowledge and reverence for tradition, as opposed to a mystic and artistic mode of living and thinking outside chronological time. The tension between these two characters expresses a tension in *A Maggot* between historical specificity and a mythic or fictional mode of being that transcends history, tying the text to a dichotomy between fact and fiction that many of its other elements problematize. The novel seems unwilling to discard but simultaneously unable to support such simple oppositions between fact and fiction, or between straightforward access to historical truth and absolute skepticism. Instead, it engages the historical-epistemological conflicts of its era despite itself, reflecting not only the concerns of these debates but also their polarizing logics of either/or.

### **Looking to History: *A Maggot* and *The French Lieutenant’s Woman***

Though separated by three novels (*The Ebony Tower*, *Daniel Martin*, and *Mantissa*) as well as a non-fiction book (*The Tree*), *The French Lieutenant’s Woman* and *A Maggot* bear striking similarities and are thus often paired by reviewers and critics. Each novel performs Fowles’s continuous juggling act of promoting existential freedom while simultaneously claiming immense aesthetic and moral authority. Each engages a

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<sup>48</sup> I follow the text in using Henry Ayscough’s last name but Rebecca Hocknell Lee’s first name, a usage that obviously (though perhaps too complicitly) underscores the differences in their gender and class status. These differences are important to the novel’s historical-epistemological engagements, as this chapter’s final section asserts.

textual past by mimicking genres and styles of the historical period in which it is set: where *The French Lieutenant's Woman* borrows the intrusive omniscient narrator, lengthy and erudite footnotes, and chapter epigraphs of the realist Victorian novel and refers extensively to Victorian poets and novelists (above all Thomas Hardy), *A Maggot* ventriloquizes eighteenth-century conventions of epistolary and picaresque novels as well as legal and spiritual discourses, explicitly acknowledges a debt to Daniel Defoe, and reproduces excerpts of the period's journalistic discourse in excerpts from *The Gentleman's Magazine's* "Historical Chronicle" section. The novels are further similar in their narrative stance, by which a conspicuously twentieth-century consciousness narrates the eighteenth- or nineteenth-century events. Though it so clearly invites comparison with its predecessor, however, *A Maggot* is far from a repeat performance, and in its differences from *The French Lieutenant's Woman* we can trace the increased historical anxiety of the Britain of its publication.

Both *The French Lieutenant's Woman* and *A Maggot* are informed by a tension between historical and artistic modes of knowing the past, and in each text Fowles's often-conflicting desires to give freedom (to characters and readers) and to maintain authority (if only the authority to grant that freedom) is expressed in part through this exploration of how—and indeed whether—we can and should know the past. In *A Maggot* as in *The French Lieutenant's Woman*, an enigmatic female character casts off past conventions and seems to exist outside historical time; in this sense, the epilogue's admiration of Rebecca's attempt to break from the past is yet another expression of Fowles's ongoing affirmation of existentialist freedom, much like his earlier valuation of Sarah's uncontrollable, unknowable being. In the earlier novel, however, the conventions



at hand are primarily literary: the narrator strives to provide his characters and readers some degree of freedom by exorcising Victorian conventions of control. In its much-discussed thirteenth chapter, which interrupts the engrossing narrative of a nineteenth-century love triangle to comment on the text, the narrator admits:

If I have pretended until now to know my characters' minds and innermost thoughts, it is because I am writing in (just as I have assumed the vocabulary and some of the "voice" of) a convention universally accepted at the time of my story: that the novelist stands next to God. [...] But I live in the age of Alain Robbe-Grillet and Roland Barthes; if this is a novel, it cannot be a novel in the modern sense of the word. (95)

Echoing Barthes's pronouncement of the 'death of the author,' the narrator further claims that though "not even the most aleatory avant-garde modern novel has managed to extirpate its author completely [...] we are no longer the gods of the Victorian image, omniscient and decreeing; but in the new theological image, with freedom our first principle, not authority" (97). Here the narrator attempts to break through his control over the fiction and instead orchestrate a fictional world in which characters and readers are free to create meaning; he reconfigures traces of a literary past in questioning the authority of his own authorship.<sup>49</sup> *A Maggot*, on the other hand, focuses on the casting-off of a historical rather than a literary inheritance.

In *A French Lieutenant's Woman* all breaks with the past (Charles's Darwinism, for instance, and Sarah's transformation from stuffy Mrs. Poulteneys' dark-cloaked servant to bohemian Rossetti's brightly-clad assistant) seem primarily to illustrate the desirability of a shift from stable, linear Victorian systems of meaning to a more modern

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<sup>49</sup> As I discuss in the next section with regard to *A Maggot*, both it and *The French Lieutenant's Woman* blur any easy line between (without equating) Fowles and his narrators. Because the narrators are sometimes associated with Fowles, but more decisively because they depict women as absolute enigmas, I use masculine pronouns to refer to these narrating consciousnesses.

and skeptical aesthetic form. In *A Maggot*, on the other hand, the literary is more often a metaphor for the historical than vice versa: for instance, its many references to theatrical conventions do not systematically rethink an artistic form but rather work to comment on the agency of *historical* actors and on human experiences of time. This difference of focus is underscored by the difference in the two novels' paratexts, Gérard Genette's term for all those materials that exist on the edge between being part of the text and being outside it: where the epigraphs of *The French Lieutenant's Woman* overwhelmingly point to Victorian literature, the excerpts interleaved amongst *A Maggot*'s chapters are clipped not just from eighteenth-century journalism but specifically from a newspaper's "Historical Chronicle." These borrowings take the form of the chronicle—bare chronological lists with apparently straightforward reference to past events—in obvious contrast with the carefully-wrought bits of poetry, fiction, and prose non-fiction that surround Sarah's and Charles's stories with literary concerns. These differences contribute to the effect that *A Maggot* is far more explicitly about the historical past and ways of knowing it than is *The French Lieutenant's Woman*; far from mere context, that past asserts itself as the central problem of the novel.

### **The Skin of the Maggot: Fowles's Paratexts**

In *A Maggot*, not only the focus but also the tenor of Fowles's engagement with the past has changed: his career-long struggle with the authority of authorship and his equally long-term engagement with modes of understanding the past are rendered pointed and defensive by the historical anxiety afoot in 1980s Britain. This shift is especially apparent at the level of the paratext. Genette's term encompasses both the peritext (which

accompanies the text in its printed form and includes features such as prefaces, introductions, footnotes, indices, the name of the author, and the publication date) and the epitext (which exists outside the printed text but influences its meaning and reception: for instance, advertisements and interviews with the author). Both *A French Lieutenant's Woman* and *A Maggot* open with paratextual elements. But while *The French Lieutenant's Woman* thus casts itself into a sea of literary and historical allusions, the paratext of *A Maggot* obsessively struggles to control the meaning of the text.

According to Genette, paratextual elements bear authorial or editorial responsibility and intention, guiding readers to perceive a text in a particular way: to print the word “novel” on the cover of a book instead of “history,” for instance, is to ask of readers and potential readers, “Please consider this book a novel” (268). While *The French Lieutenant's Woman* and *A Maggot* are similar in beginning and then interspersing their stretches of narrative with paratextual elements, though, the paratext of the former is a far more open-ended and less anxious structure, leaving the text and its readers more (though far from entirely) to our own devices. After its cover and publishing information, a reader of *The French Lieutenant's Woman* is faced with an epigraph attributed to Marx, an acknowledgements page referring to four books from which the following text borrows, a reiteration of the novel's title, and then the first chapter (which itself begins with an epigraph from a poem by Hardy). Even so embedded, the narrative of this novel begins with less hedging than does that of *A Maggot*, in which a reader encounters cover, title, publishing information, and then (in the position of the acknowledgements in *The French Lieutenant's Woman*), the signed and dated prologue. This prologue attempts to control the meaning both of the title that

thrice precedes and then immediately follows it, and of the text it introduces: ‘Please consider this book a mere whim,’ it says, ‘and do not mistake it for an engagement with history or historical narrative, factual or fictional.’

Fowles’s use of chapter epigraphs in *The French Lieutenant’s Woman* is, as Deborah Bowen argues, an unstable act of control. The epigraphs open up the text to whole other worlds of meaning and interact with each other in unpredictable ways, leading Bowen to discuss “the power of the reader in a text where the writer plays with plural voices but at the same time desires mastery of them” (67). Though Fowles claims immense authority through historically and morally didactic narrative intrusions, Bowen sees the epigraphs as more destabilizing than Genette’s sketch of paratextuality might lead us to expect. She points out that “this notion of paratext as a free space for authorial intentionality must be moderated in the case of the epigraph [...]. Unlike a preface or a footnote, an epigraph almost always originates with a different writer from the text, thus formalizing the notion of the ‘intertextual event as consciously admitting a polyphony of voices” (69). *The French Lieutenant’s Woman* begins strongly in the spirit of the epigraph—with the Marx epigraph, the acknowledgements of permissions for its epigraphs, and a chapter epigraph before the body of the text—and does not offer explicit or unambiguous directions to its readers.

Clearly, *A Maggot* is framed in a far more controlling and cautious way, with paratextual elements that operate with greater reference to the author and his plans for the text. Its prologue outright directs readers rather than offering evocative snippets of powerful and culturally-valued contemporary texts (as *The French Lieutenant’s Woman* does with Marx and Hardy). Also unlike the earlier novel, which ends in the world of its

story, *A Maggot* closes with a seven-page epilogue again directing readers' reading practices and interpretative bearings. Where the 1969 novel offers multiple endings and leaves it at that, the 1985 one seems compelled to explain, defend, and warn. This framing, this containment of the fictional text through the voice of the author, works to fashion a skin to keep Fowles's maggot inside and the real world of history out—unlike the epigraphs of *The French Lieutenant's Woman*, which from the very beginning blur the edge of the fiction by reaching out into cultural and literary history. Indeed, in *A Maggot's* prologue and epilogue, Fowles seems to posit fiction and history as so absolutely separate that he can simply announce he's doing one and not the other. Yet his insistence itself belies an anxiety that a historically-interested text such as *A Maggot* is unlikely actually to work that way in a historically-uneasy period such as the British 1980s.

In the prologue and epilogue that form part of *A Maggot's* peritext and in the interviews its author later contributed to its epitext, Fowles endorses what is commonly labeled 'proper history,' an untheorized, common-sense approach to the past closely associated with the modernist tradition within academic history. The epilogue speaks the language of this approach when it asserts: "I have the greatest respect for exact and scrupulously documented history, [...] but this exacting discipline is essentially a science, and immensely different in its aims and methods from those of fiction" (449). The author's voice outside the text continues to assume an easy distinction between historically-irrelevant fiction and 'proper history'; citing a 1986 interview, for instance, Pamela Cooper notes that "Fowles's informal approach to the age with which *A Maggot* deals suggests that scholarship has nothing to do with his sense of the artist as historian:

‘As an historical period it bores me in many ways: I can’t be bothered to analyse Walpole’s régime as a proper historian would’” (215).<sup>50</sup> Yet the novel simply does not endorse proper or modernist history, characterized in the paratext by an unproblematic differentiation of fiction and history and an equally straightforward faith in historians’ access to a factual past. Modernist history asserts that, with the proper research skills, we *can* know the truth about history—but *A Maggot* is focused entirely on the unknowable past, the unsolvable mystery.

Not only does the body of the novel contradict the paratext, refusing to remain a harmless maggot unrelated to historical knowledge, but it also continually exceeds and inverts its paratextual skin. Through the prologue, the epilogue, and later interviews, Fowles strives to control his text and prevent readers from interpreting it as anti- (or even as related to) ‘proper history.’ He implies through the text and through his anxiety that the alternative to scientifically-certain history is mere fiction, mere mysticism—even as he sometimes suggests that fiction and mysticism are superior modes of knowing and being. Such a tension problematizes an effort to contain *A Maggot*’s fiction within the truthful communication of the epilogue and prologue, utterances that fit into Genette’s definition of factual texts in which author=narrator (whereas, in fictional texts, author≠narrator) (“Fictional”). Rather than allowing its fictional body and factual paratextual statements—straight from the mouth of the author—to remain separate, *A Maggot* complicates the distinction between fictional and factual discourses. It blurs the line between the very forms of knowing and telling, fiction and historical narrative, which its paratexts take such pains to separate.

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<sup>50</sup> Here Cooper quotes from Baker 666-7.

While the prologue and epilogue (which ask readers to equate “I” and author) are physically set apart from the narrative, the distinction is far less absolute than this separation initially suggests. Consider, for example, the similarity of these two paragraphs, one from the fictional body of *A Maggot* and the next from its factual epigraph:

Yet surrender to attacks of intense emotion was an essential part of both its [the religious movement of Dissent’s] being and its practice, perhaps not least because it stood so deeply against the aristocratic, then the aping middle class, and now the universal English tradition in such matters; which dreads natural feeling (what other language speaks of *attacks* of emotion?) and has made an art of sangfroid, meiosis, cynicism and the stiff upper lip to keep it at bay. We may talk coolly now in psychiatric terms of the hysterical enthusiasm, the sobbing, the distorted speech in the gift of tongues, all the other wild phenomena found in so much early Dissenting worship. We should do better to imagine a world where [...] a sense of self barely exists; or most often where it does, is repressed; where most are still like John Lee, more characters written by someone else than free individuals in our comprehension of the adjective and the noun. (388)

I suspect we owe quite as much to all those incoherent sobs and tears and ecstasies of the illiterate as to the philosophers of mind and the sensitive artists. Unorthodox religion was the only vehicle by which the vast majority, who were neither philosophers nor artists, could express this painful breaking of the seed of the self from the hard soil of an irrational and tradition-bound society—and a society not so irrational that it did not very well know how much it depended on *not* seeing its traditions questioned, its foundations disturbed. Can we wonder the new-born ego [...] often chose means to survive and to express itself as irrational as those that restrained it? (451).

These two passages are strikingly similar in tone, style, and aim. Each analyses the historical setting of the novel from a twentieth-century perspective. Each uses psychoanalytic discourse—“repressed,” “ego.” Each attempts to understand the fundamental difference of past human experiences, and to historicize a twentieth-century sense of self. It seems impossible to distinguish the “we” of one from the “we” of the other. In other words, given the similarity of these two passages, and the strong

implication that the “I” of the epilogue is the “I” of the author, not just the paratexts but parts of the body of *A Maggot* seem to speak the voice of the author.

The extreme proximity of tone, message, and historical knowledge conveyed in this pair of passages is only one example of the interpenetration of worlds (fact and fiction, author and characters, past and present, paratext and text) both performed and forsworn in *A Maggot*—one way among many in which this maggot turns itself inside-out. Indeed, Fowles’s assurance that he believes in this totally distinct mode of knowing called history but is here merely writing a fiction seems not merely strange given the narrator’s historical and moral commentary—seemingly in the voice of the author—but also awfully naive for an author as erudite as he (and who implies readers as erudite as those he does), and untenable surrounding a text that questions the possibility and desirability of total access to explanation of past events or total reliance upon rationality for knowledge. His fervent assertion of fiction’s distinction from and his own respect for ‘proper history’ becomes more legible in context, in the text’s outside world of the heritage wars, debates over historical pedagogy, and an increasingly visible (and threatening) postmodernist approach to the philosophy of history.

### ***A Maggot* Historicized**

Between the 1969 of *The French Lieutenant’s Woman* and the 1985 of *A Maggot*, Fowles was far from the only person whose attention turned more seriously and anxiously to history. Conflicts over historical knowledge—characterized by a deep sense of the meaningfulness and power of the past, and simultaneously a deep doubt regarding the accessibility and nature of historical truth—rose in prominence within British politics,



popular culture, art, and scholarship during these years. The heritage movement became increasingly active, and its opponents increasingly vocal. Simultaneously, and relatedly, ‘The Great History Debate’ over history in the schools raged. And finally, postmodernist thought extended its reach significantly in the years between the two novels, subjecting the widely-accepted objectivity of modernist history to thoroughgoing critique. Here, I examine *A Maggot*’s echoes of these three highly polarizing debates, arguing that the novel thoughtfully questions the transparency and neutrality of historical authority—despite its paratextual claim to have nothing to do with history, and despite Fowles’s explicit endorsement of ‘proper’ (transparent, common-sense) historical knowledge.

*A Maggot* urges readers to look at the national past and its underwriting of British institutions with a questioning, critical eye, at a moment when the heritage movement urged the British public to value and identify with that past. Culture Minister David Lammy claims that though a preservationist movement had been active since the late Victorian period, “It was only the sale of Mentmore House and its contents in 1977 which re-kindled a public outcry and led to the creation of the National Heritage Memorial Fund. And with it—for the first time—the concept of ‘national heritage.’ Shortly afterward, English Heritage emerged and the heritage world started looking much as we know it today.” And very shortly after that, as Lammy regretfully concedes:

in certain circles, heritage began to be a dirty word. Against the backdrop of ITV’s *Brideshead Revisited* [1981], heritage began to have inherently conservative, narrow-minded connotations. The poet Tom Paulin voiced it most succinctly, ‘The British heritage industry is a loathsome collection of theme parks and dead values.’ A thesis expanded upon at great length in Robert Hewison’s *The Heritage Industry* [1987] and Patrick Wright’s *On Living in an Old Country*

[1985].

By 1985 there was a very public sense not only of the significance and pleasures of national heritage, but also of a critique of heritage as a whitewashing, domesticating approach to the past that served the status quo and the political right.

The novel's judgment of Ayscough's interest in precedent and tradition is thus implicitly critical of the heritage industry, the more so given the novel's attacks on the related ills of commodification and "media manipulation and cultural hegemony" (453), as the epilogue puts it. Lawyer to an unnamed nobleman, Ayscough represents (in both the artistic and the legal sense) the ruling classes, and he both offers and demands absolute reverence toward tradition and precedent, which he views as transparently knowable. In other words, he claims the authority to articulate and uphold the status quo. He is also a thoroughly unsympathetic character, arrogant, snobbish, two-faced, and brutally single-minded: "I shall have her yet, I shall know," he tells one witness of Rebecca (261). In Ayscough's frustration with her testimony, the narrator comments, "Once or twice his mind slipped back to the days of the real question; interrogation aided by rack and thumbscrew" (425). While he stops at torture, he does lie, bully and manipulate witnesses, and hold them without allowing communication with family members. He revels in threatening people with the gallows without any evidence that they may have committed a crime, as when he tricks harmless actor Lacy into his chambers and, with "a humourless smile," informs him: "My client has written a piece for you, my friend. It is called *The Steps and the String*, or *Twang-dang-dillo-dee*. In which you shall jig upon the scaffold, at the end of Jack Ketch's rope" (109). Ayscough's blood-thirst constantly connects his desire to chart out past events with his power, and

with his snivelling deference to his powerful employer. The narrator not only shows us these examples of Ayscough's faults as a moral and epistemic model, but also judges him outright: his "crudely chauvinistic contempt for [another] witness is offensive" (227), he is "shrewd [...] in [the brutal whoremonger] Claiborne's terms" (230), he is "imprisoned" by "tacit prejudices" (231). Through this figure, the novel connects uncritical celebration of traditional hierarchy and knowledge with injustice and narrow-mindedness.

Further, its choice and treatment of historical setting place the novel at odds with a trend to aestheticize and domesticate British history as light entertainment: where *The French Lieutenant's Woman* takes place in a lovable though flawed Victorian era, *A Maggot* inhabits a fiercely alien eighteenth century. The Edenic countryside of the earlier novel—where Sarah can sleep peacefully and where playful lovers find privacy as well as a nice bowl of milk at the nearby dairy—is replaced by a threatening wilderness of confusing paths and cutthroat highwaymen, "an ugly and all-invasive reminder of the Fall" (11). Its plush parlours and spare but clean and comfortable servant's quarters are similarly supplanted by "narrow streets and alleys, [...] Tudor houses and crammed cottage closes" that "conveyed nothing but an antediluvian barbarism, such as we can experience today only in some primitive foreign land" (11). Modern readers might long to inhabit the world of *The French Lieutenant's Woman*, but few would choose to make their homes in *A Maggot's* charmless England.

Even the sex trade is more approachable in *The French Lieutenant's Woman*. Here, prostitution appears first as a highly aestheticized tableau, the nude women of a high-class club interspersed with eighteenth-century and Classical descriptions of similar scenes, and second as a domesticated personal interaction when a drunken and distraught

Charles goes to the rooms of a prostitute who turns out to be a kind, honest woman and a good mother. Rebecca's brothel and her experiences as Mr. Bartholomew's hired woman are neither aestheticized nor domesticated, introduced as they are largely through the testimony of the brothel's crude and cruel Mistress Claibourne. Both Sarah (the unfortunately-named prostitute Charles hires) and Rebecca are driven to prostitution through economic hardship and sexism, and each proves to be "a brave, kind girl" (*French* 321) at heart, but in the meantime we see Rebecca's life at Claibourne's house and on her journey to the cave in far more disturbing detail. Prostitution is here presented more bleakly as sex for money, accompanied by the threat of violent punishment for women who would leave; this representation focuses far more on the prostitute as victim of historical and cultural circumstances—the religious fanaticism of her community, the shortage of economic opportunities for women, the absence of legal protections for women and the poor. *A Maggot's* less cozy setting presents readers with a past most readers would be less than enthusiastic about inheriting; it attacks nostalgia for a pastoral British past in terms similar to those with which critics attack the heritage movement and industry.

During the same period, British politicians, educators, and journalists were much occupied with disagreements over the place of history (and particularly the English past) as a subject in Britain's schools. In its manifestations in the 1970s, '80s, and '90s, this debate organized itself around differences between two approaches (though in reality these are the extreme poles of a continuum rather than *the* two possible pedagogical or theoretical approach to history): the 'great tradition' of history as a grand national narrative, a chronological sequence of great men and events, as opposed to the

increasingly influential ‘new history,’ which emphasized skills (especially document analysis) and concepts (such as, most notoriously, empathy). Robert Phillips argues that by the 1980s, “New Right discourses on history—expressed publicly through the press—had managed to create an artificial polarization of the ‘skills versus content’ and the ‘traditional versus new’ debates” (46). Examining the controversy leading up to and following the 1990 Final Report of the National Curriculum History Working Group, Vivienne Little summarizes the weaknesses of each pole: “While content-led curricula were open to various charges of imbalance or distortion, [...] learner-led or ‘new history’ ones were accused of undervaluing knowledge in the endeavour to promote conceptual development” (323). As in its skeptical implications regarding British cultural heritage, *A Maggot* appears aligned with the more critical and questioning half of this dichotomy. Indeed, the formal structure of *A Maggot*, its scarcity of narration and centrality of documents, renders it a performance of the ‘new history.’

*A Maggot* engages historical pedagogy not through commentary so much as through enactment: it teaches. Many critics, often in dismay and annoyance, describe the narrative voice of *The French Lieutenant’s Woman* as didactic and pedantic; Susan Onega, for instance, argues that the novel’s footnotes paint the narrator as “an impartial—if somewhat erudite and pedantic—historian” (72), and Richard Hauer Costa calls the novel’s plot “the flimsiest of covers for Fowles’ didacticism” (2). The narrator of *A Maggot* also works to teach us moral and historical lessons; the sense of excessive didacticism recurs in reviews of this later novel. Robert Nye, for one, describes it as a good start that dissolves into its author’s desire to teach and preach; in contrast to “the poet Fowles” responsible for the promising parts of *A Maggot*, he claims:

The other Fowles, alas, is didactic, a preacher/teacher with an incurable lust to inflict his views upon us. While he confines his lectures to little asides about the importance of sheep and the wool trade in the early eighteenth century, this Fowles is just about tolerable; but I have to say that I regard the Author's Sermon (called epilogue) with which the book concludes as not just rubbish, but a serious failure of artistic nerve and responsibility.

Setting aside the question of artistic merit, I want to highlight these readers'

uncomfortable sense that they are being subjected to a lesson, and the question both *The French Lieutenant's Woman* and *A Maggot* may raise in an annoyed reader: who does he think he is? The novels construct a teacherly voice, positing readers who know less than this erudite speaker and who ought to learn from him.

While the narrator of *A Maggot* shares the didactic voice of *The French Lieutenant Woman's* narrator, it teaches its 'students' radically differently. Whereas the latter is composed almost entirely of narrative and (in chapter thirteen and many shorter passages of historical commentary) dissertative exposition, the former includes very little of the narrator's/instructor's voice. In the teacher-centered mode of the 1969 novel, the narrator delivers lengthy lectures on peasant sex, Thomas Hardy, literary theory, and countless other topics; here, quotations are rallied as evidence for historical and moral claims and to support a sense of realism. In the 1985 novel, instead, readers face a collection of documents—transcribed depositions, newspaper clippings, letters—in which brief stretches of narration and commentary are peripheral to the archive that awaits our analysis. In other words, *A Maggot* teaches its lessons through a focus on documents and inquiry rather than on a narrative; its readers are invited to participate in the process of historical knowledge by evaluating competing contemporary accounts of a series of events, and navigating the unfamiliar language and form of eighteenth-century

journalism. Unlike *The French Lieutenant's Woman*, this novel decentralizes the event, the fact, and the actor, which all remain evasive. Also in opposition to 'great tradition' history and pedagogy, *A Maggot* departs from a Great Men tradition by omitting the name of the nobleman and focusing instead on a prostitute; its epilogue directs us to re-evaluate the "incoherent sobs and tears and ecstasies of the illiterate" as just as historically significant as "the philosophers of mind and the sensitive artists" who are more central to a traditional account of eighteenth-century England (451). This novel urges us to attend to people who did not triumph, attempts that fizzled out in the face of powerful establishments. In other words, it launches a critical history more aligned with Rebecca's suspicion of past authority than with Ayscough's (more successful but less admirable) efforts to shore it up—and more aligned with the 'new history' than with the 'great tradition' of teaching the British past.

The novel's performance of a procedure- rather than fact-focused historical pedagogy produces serious doubts regarding historical knowledge, doubts that mirror the concerns of recent developments within historical pedagogy and scholarship. The debate over school history and shifts within academic history are, naturally, far from unrelated: as Little observes, the conflict that produced (and then commented upon) the 1990 Final Report took place in three overlapping arenas, the professional, academic, and political: "There is a 'new history' at the academic level, which, while it shares with its school counterpart a concern with method, also raises wider questions about what counts as history and the epistemological status of historians' accounts of the past, which go well beyond those at issue in the forms of knowledge debate of the fifties and sixties" (323). Little's description of academic 'new history' (an umbrella term that refers to

developments such as microhistory and cultural history) might also apply to *A Maggot*: “History used to be about politics and war, now it is also about economics, social structure, culture. It used to be about powerful men and heroes and nations, now it is about ordinary lives too and about social identities” (323). In the face of such multiplicity, “General history and literary narrative, characteristic of the ‘great tradition’ of the subject, are much more difficult to sustain” (323). Like the ‘new history,’ *A Maggot* rediscovers “those ‘hidden from history’ — the common person, women, blacks,” engages “longer-standing perceptions of vested interest alongside epistemological purity in the origins of academic disciplines,” and rethinks “history’s characteristic forms of expression” (323-4).

The prologue and epilogue need to endorse a history of simple objectivity and claim that the text they bracket has nothing to do with history, *because* that text so clearly critiques a long-established mode of knowing, telling, and teaching the nation’s past. Like the ‘Great History Debate’ to which, willingly or unwillingly, the novel contributes, *A Maggot* raises “profound questions about the role of the past and of history in the national culture, the nature of the discipline itself [...]—in short, about what history should teach” (Little 319). In raising these questions, furthermore, the novel echoes not only critics of the heritage movement and proponents of the ‘new history’ in the schools, but also the poststructuralist philosophy of history. In the 1970s and ’80s, philosophers increasingly turned their attention to historical knowledge and writing—and philosophers of history to poststructuralist thought. Though different in many ways, these critics’, history teachers’, historians’, and philosophers’ approaches to historical knowledge are similar in their willingness to question the possibility, significance, and proper form of



historical knowledge. They also share a concern with the role of the historical knower in the construction of that knowledge: rather than a historian holding a mirror to the past, they envision history as a set of procedures, conventions, and acts of selection. *A Maggot* echoes such questioning stances and participates in the newly-widespread questioning of ‘factual’ historical discourse.

*The French Lieutenant’s Woman* was published at a moment of deconstruction’s increasing importance to English-language literature and literary studies—Derrida had delivered “Structure, Sign, and Play in the Discourse of the Human Sciences” at Johns Hopkins in 1966, and Barthes had published “The Death of the Author” in English (in *Aspen*) in 1967 and in French (in *Manteia*) in 1968. The novel’s references to Barthes and the *nouveau roman* represent Fowles’s experiments as appealingly novel French borrowings. But between the publication of this novel and *A Maggot*, postmodernism not only became more pervasive in literature and literary studies but also extended its attention to the conventions and texts of scholarly history. For instance, the years between 1969 and 1985 saw the publication or translation into English of Hayden White’s *Metahistory* (1973) and *Tropics of Discourse* (1978), Barthes’s “The Discourse of History” (first published in 1967, but translated into English in 1981), Michel Foucault’s “Nietzsche, Genealogy, History” (1971, in English 1977) and *The Order of Things* (1966, in English 1970), Michel de Certeau’s *The Writing of History* (1975, in English 1988), and Paul Ricoeur’s three-volume *Time and Narrative* (1983-5, in English 1984-8). Like these and other reflections on historiography, *A Maggot* poses questions about the nature and limitations of historical knowledge by focusing its attention on the role of the knower in historical knowledge, as well as through its obsession with the

absolutely other and unknowable.

It does so in contradiction with its paratext's confident endorsement of 'proper history,' which as Alan Munslow reminds us is still a powerful mode despite what its "more militant" practitioners see as the threat of postmodernism: "In the UK and USA modernist history remains (for the majority) the means for [...] square dealing with the past. Indeed, the argument runs that by relativising history we can no longer grasp the significance and meaning of the present" (165). It does not require a great deal of imagination to read the concerns and style of poststructuralist theory in this novel, with its outright insistence that the self is a cultural construct, its formal de-centering of the author and demotion of linear narrative, its performance of the bafflement of Truth in the face of multiple truths, its attention to the production of knowledge, and its obsession with the difficulties of binary oppositions (the rational and the emotional, the bodily and the spiritual, purity and impurity, truth and falsehood, past and present: dramatized for instance through the mysteriously twin and co-dependent existence of idiot Dick and scholar Mr. Bartholomew). *A Maggot* undermines the obviousness of the line between fact and fiction, between the believable and the unbelievable, in part through its use of an archive that is partly discovered but partly fabricated; while the pages of *The Gentleman's Magazine* are viable historical sources, for instance, Fowles also quotes from a 1736 issue of *The Western Gazette*—a newspaper established in 1737. Like the philosophies of history listed above, but through the techniques of fiction, this text reflects upon the constructedness and fallibility of historical knowledge based on archival research.

Indeed, as Tony Thwaites observes, the novel begs for a deconstructive reading

whether the critic likes it or not: “This cave within the text which calls itself and describes itself as *A Maggot* contains: what? Precisely a maggot, or *A Maggot*. The outside which contains the inside is smaller than and contained within the inside: the maggot is, fortuitously but precisely, a figure of Derridean textual ‘double invagination’” (62). He declines even to “go into the psychoanalytical richnesses of the primal scene in *A Maggot*, though—given that it involves an enclosed womblike space in the earth, which is entered by an impotent (castrated?) man and two companions called Dick and Fanny—this clearly begs to be done” (63). In reading *A Maggot* as a mystery story, Thwaites finds he cannot avoid Derrida and Lacan; it is similarly impossible to read the novel’s engagement of history without encountering the poststructuralists’ impact on that field of knowledge.

*A Maggot* works as neatly to illustrate Michel de Certeau’s poststructuralist Freudian philosophy of history as its cave does to demonstrate double invagination; it so clearly works alongside de Certeau’s text and out of similar concerns that it is difficult to view as a mere maggot rather than as a reflection upon historiography. According to de Certeau’s *The Writing of History*, historiography primarily sets up and erodes boundaries—between the past and the present, among historical periods, at the limits of what we label “events,” and so forth. Writing history is a dual operation of separating the past from the present and simultaneously of flattening the past’s alterity through writing and understanding it. De Certeau deconstructs this procedure and the oppositions it constructs:

Thus founded on the rupture between a past that is its object, and a present that is the place of its practice, history endlessly finds the present in its object and the past in its practice. Inhabited by the uncanniness that it seeks, history imposes its law upon the faraway places that it conquers

when it fosters the illusion that it is bringing them back to life. (36)

In this theory, historiography works like entombment: the historian both buries the dead, containable past away from the living present, and commemorates it through his or her present act of writing. History is, after all, “a discipline that deals with death as an object of knowledge and, in doing so, causes the production of an exchange among living souls” (47).

At every level, *A Maggot* too is preoccupied with otherness—and particularly with the possibility of an otherness so absolute that it prevents rational understanding, emplotment, or (literally, in the cases of the suicide Dick and disappeared Mr. Bartholomew) proper burial. It repeatedly uses imagery suggesting different worlds: at the level of its story, for instance, Dick seems to Jones “[a]s if he had dropped from the moon” (197) and exudes what the narrator calls “an otherness” (28); Rebecca tells her interrogator that “Thy world is not my world, nor Jesus Christ’s neither” (423). At the level of its telling, too, *A Maggot* posits multiple and absolutely separate ‘worlds.’ For example, the narrator treats the eighteenth century as “a world where [...] a sense of self barely exists” (388), emphatically a different reality from that of its author and readers. Yet neither Ayscough nor readers are permitted to keep past past and present present, outside out and inside in; readers can no more impose our rationality than can Ayscough his law on these mysteries.

Instead, when he and we reach the cave at the center of this epistemologically-driven novel, part historical inquiry and part “classic locked-room mystery” (Thwaites 57), we find not clues or rational explanation but a maggot—or, even more frustratingly, multiple and contradictory maggots (maggots eating decaying flesh in one telling, a

floating maggot-like machine in the other). *A Maggot* contests “objectivism, representation, truth, factualism, reference, realism, the subject-object binary, all of which were ideally located in the figure of the disinterested modernist historian” (Munslow 25). It also presents readers with an inadequate archive, frustrating a modernist confidence in the ultimate accessibility of the truth. So far from including a smoking gun, this mystery lacks even the body in question: when Ayscough and the reader have heard every available witness’s story (unable to find Mr. Bartholomew, whether dead, in hiding, or risen to heaven), read every existing relevant document (unable to access the trunk-full of papers Dick and his master burn), and examined the terrain of the tale, we are left without a reliable account.

*A Maggot* thus performs philosophical doubts and practical limitations by prompting its readers to act as historians. It puts us through an experience all too familiar to working historians but rarely represented in dissertations, popular or scholarly histories, or historical novels: the reader/historian formulates a historical question, journeys to the archive, sorts through a collection of sources both relevant and random, both fascinating and dull, and reluctantly concludes that the surviving sources simply cannot answer the question or provide an account. Where the historian would cut his or her losses and formulate a new question, the reader is asked to question popular and easy assumptions about historians’ transparent access to past events, an access that now appears constructed both by the accidents of documentary survival and by interested selection: Ayscough’s motivations in recording particular people’s testimonies, his power to require them to speak, and his choice and phrasing of questions. *A Maggot* is like *The French Lieutenant’s Woman* in frustrating our desire to ‘know what happened,’ but the

two novels use significantly different mechanisms of narrative frustration: *The French Lieutenant's Woman* offers multiple endings direct from the impresario, each in its own way a conclusion to the romance plot, but the later novel more radically offers *no* ending in the sense of a conclusion to the mystery plot. Rather, it leaves us in this position of a historian faced with an inadequate archive, or a detective without the data to solve a case. 'What happened' is here unknowable not because (as in the earlier novel) it did not really happen (because it is fictional rather than historical), but because the past includes fundamentally unknowable events and individuals.

*A Maggot* emphasizes the unrecorded, the ineffable, and the inexplicable as challenges to historiography, reminding readers that in reading textual traces of the past we must neglect events and lives that passed without a trace, or that left partial (in both senses) traces. It also posits a world in which some events, or at least some accounts, are inassimilable into historical logic. The two available accounts of the events in the cave—the version Rebecca offers Jones immediately after the events but later forswears, and the version she offers Ayscough under oath but at a greater distance from the events—fly in the face of such logics. In the first, Rebecca is raped by Satan before Mr. B., Dick, three witches, and Satan have an orgy; in the second, she is led to a floating "maggot" that sounds to a modern reader like a spacecraft or perhaps a time machine, which seems to contain a television on which the machine's pilot screens utopic and dystopic scenes. But if these are people from the future operating fanciful but fundamentally mechanical objects, how are we to understand the scene in which three women of different ages step into each other and join into the wise pilot? When Ayscough tries to reread Rebecca's heavenly "June Eternal" as "*Alias*, castles in Spain" (369), how does that make it more

accountable to his logic—given that she would have to have flown over Spain in a buoyant maggot or watched an as-yet-uninvented film by that explanation? If she has dreamed it all, as Ayscough suggests (370, 372), how does she come up with all the futuristic details that register so strongly with readers?

Beyond these small frustrations lies the larger one first raised by the Satanic narrative: a spiritual account is simply inadmissible to the logic of history or law; it does not count. *A Maggot* thus performs what de Certeau describes as historiography's charting out of the "believable," the thinkable or unthinkable, and what Hayden White discusses in terms of selection and narration. As White argues, every aspect of history-writing involves interpretation in that we must select which data we accept: for instance, even if all available sources agree that a miracle occurred, a modern historian will not represent the event as a miracle (59). Like Ayscough in his final letter on the case to his employer, we can accept that Rebecca believes her own testimony, but most modern readers will remain suspicious of her proto-Shakerism. The novel encourages such skepticism by setting up Mr. Bartholomew as a deeply unsympathetic character; it is difficult to accept that the erratic man who abuses Rebecca is so holy as to be carried directly to Heaven (408). And Rebecca hardly even asks to be trusted, asserting blankly, "I care not what other people believed. I know only what I believe" (418), repeatedly refusing explanation and telling Ayscough that she does not know how or why what she believes is true.

The active role of the historian in emplotting historical data and in mediating between the storytelling and analytical operations of historiography results, according to de Certeau, in histories' need for reliability. Readers of a history must trust the historian,

or question his or her trustworthiness, in a manner foreign to the process of reading a mathematic proof. The mixed quality of historical discourse—separating and connecting as it does past and present, narrative and analysis—also manifests in disciplinary histories’ uses of sources, their re-presentation of “chronicle, archive, document”:

Through ‘quotations,’ references, notes, [...] historiographical discourse is constructed as a *knowledge of the other*. It is constructed according to a problematic of procedure and trial, or of *citation*, that can at the same time ‘subpoena’ a referential language that acts therein as reality, and judge it in the name of knowledge. [...] The role of quoted language is thus one of accrediting discourse. (94)

This function of citation is apparent in *A Maggot*’s use of chronicles and other documents. Yet, as these chronicles also suggest so vividly, and as de Certeau argues, the quoted text in its necessary otherness “upholds the danger of an uncanniness which alters the translator’s or commentator’s knowledge,” even though “what is cited is fragmented, used over again and patched together in a text” (251). The real and false documents of *A Maggot* imply a problematic difference between surviving traces of the past—a body of conflicting truths (and falsehoods)—and a selective and conjectural narrative based on that archive—Ayscough’s final letter, or the decisive story and ending that our narrator pointedly denies us.

The documents underscore (by requiring of readers) the tricky even if educated guess-work of evaluating accounts’ reliability and distinguishing the genuine from the forged, falsified, or misrecorded. The text includes both borrowed and fabricated sources, challenging readers to speculate as to their authenticity. It also raises these issues on the level of the story by questioning the accuracy of John Tudor, the clerk who lurks in the novel’s background and records each character’s deposition. Though rendered invisible in the transcriptions, this man is not a faithful recording machine but a “sardonic scribe”



(388) who jokes rather darkly with Rebecca that “where I cannot read when I copy in the long hand, why, I make it up. So I may hang a man, or pardon him, and none the wiser” (343). In part though this apparently insignificant historical actor, spending his life in the busywork of an informational middle-man, *A Maggot* places the possibility of historical knowledge under question. Readers leave the book “none the wiser” about ‘what happened’ not for an accidental, single reason peculiar to this story, but for a collection of reasons inherent to much historical research: because scribes can be as careless as John Tudor; because contemporary accounts can be written in discourses so different from our own as Rebecca’s spiritual and Ayscough’s legal languages; because people with various motivations can forge documents just as Fowles does; because witnesses have died; because historical voices can be silenced or compromised by disability (like Dick’s), illiteracy (like Rebecca’s), or the dynamics of power (like the witnesses Ayscough treats so differently according to their station, and often with the threat of death accompanying his displeasure with their testimony).

### **Historians and Mystics: *A Maggot* in the Excluded Middle**

John Tudor is only one of *A Maggot*’s many history-writers. In the multiplicity of this text’s representations of historical inquiry, we can see its compulsion toward and simultaneous dissatisfaction with an all-or-nothing approach to historical knowledge. Together, Ayscough and this scribe perform the work of oral historians, eliciting testimony and transforming it into documents to be analysed and cited. In the clerk’s self-interested fudging and the lawyer’s equally self-interested bullying, they are unethical practitioners of this methodology; any potential for impartiality that might reside in legal

or historical methods of inquiry proves no match for the characters' human flaws. Yet in the end, these men's individual failings are not the sole or even the primary impediment to total knowledge of past events. Shadowed by his assistant, Ayscough becomes a main character in a novel that quickly turns from a single-layer narrative (of travellers on a mysterious journey) to focus more on the *processes*—and inevitable frustrations—of knowing than on the events that Ayscough, the narrator, and readers strive to understand.

Historiography—splitting as it does between past events and present procedures of research and writing—shares with mystery fiction, and with this novel, what Thwaites calls “a twin narrative, one concerning the events which have taken place and the other concerning the reconstruction of those events” (57). Not at all incidentally, this structure brings together mystery and history, demonstrating the similarity of these genres' conventions. Thus Thwaite's description of Ayscough's task of detection also describes the task of the 'proper historian':

Now on the one hand the story derived from the testimonies must have the ability to account for all the events narrated in the testimonies. At the same time, though, it is *accountable to* those narratives [...], introducing in its turn nothing that cannot be verified from the original testimonies. The discourse must allow the construction of a single, necessary and sufficient story, one which can be seen in retrospect to link all of the recounted events along the linear thread of chronology and causality. Discourse and story must in other words be a one-to-one mapping, the pieces from one fitting rearranged into the space of the other, with no overlap in either case. (57)

By dramatizing inquiry into the past as a crime investigation in a novel whose setting and concerns are so emphatically historical, *A Maggot* renders Ayscough not only a lawyer but also a historian figure in this novel. The obsession with history that permeates the levels of the text finds expression in this detective's flawed and biased attempt to reconstruct the past; this alignment of historical knowledge and legal authority

emphasizes the workings of power in the creation of knowledge and undermines an easy acceptance of a modernist history that works, as Munslow explains, “to demonstrate [the historian’s] separation from the present (ideology, society, politics, text)—to make him/her ahistorical” and to prompt readers “to consume the truthful narrative as a coherent reflection of reality” (27). Yet Ayscough ultimately fails to offer a plausible and coherent narrative.

Furthermore, even as readers are encouraged to identify with the processes of historical knowing, it is the mystic—and not the historian-figure seeking answers through rational inquiry—who proves sympathetic. The two main characters of *A Maggot* at least in terms of the size of their speaking roles, Rebecca and Ayscough represent directly opposed and mutually exclusive stances toward historical time and knowledge: in opposition to Ayscough’s reverence for tradition and precedent (and terror of change), Rebecca is entirely oriented toward the future, and in opposition to the lawyer’s need for evidence, Rebecca seeks inspired faith. She is depicted sympathetically as the ruined young woman—“hardly more than a girl” (6)—who empathizes with the deaf-mute servant Dick; she emerges from the cave as an appealing proto-feminist and socialist, and closes the novel as Madonna with child. As these hints of anachronism and ahistoricity suggest, Rebecca is not so much an alternative historian figure as an anti-historian, self-consciously positing her language and understanding in opposition to Ayscough’s rational explanations and need for proof, “thy alphabet” and “mine” (380). So far from a writer of history, Rebecca cannot write at all, and while the lawyer uses the written word in an attempt to pin down past events into a meaningful narrative fitting his society’s

preconceptions, Rebecca hopes to prophesy the explosion of those preconceptions and a shift from human history to the heaven she calls June Eternal.

At the novel's end, we leave Ayscough offering his employer what is transparently an inadequate account of the events in question, suggesting the inadequacy of his faith in the solid ground of rational, transparent knowledge of the past—both as a sequence of events (what happened in the cave) and as the basis of an unchanging, traditional social system. The narrator then turns to Rebecca, who in the final scene sings a lullaby while nursing her newborn daughter. While “it is clear they are not rational words, and can mean nothing,” the scene affirms Rebecca's simple, emphatically natural mode of being as a serious ethical challenge to the defensive, past-oriented posture of Ayscough and the rest of the establishment.

These two modes of being and thinking in time, the historical and the mystic, are embodied in characters who not only engage in direct conflict and prove totally unable to communicate or collaborate with each other, but also occupy wildly different positions: wealthy and poor, literate and illiterate, Anglican and Dissenting, and most obviously, male and female. Fowles's habit of underscoring and naturalizing gender differences, particularly in the figure of the enigmatic woman outside her historical moment, manifests here in an emphasis on Rebecca's femaleness. She is both whore and Madonna, and in both positions her reproductive organs take center stage: we hear about Rebecca's lack of venereal disease, her vulva exposed at Stonehenge, her supposed infertility, her pregnant belly, and the birth and first breastfeeding of her daughter. The novel also represents this mystic, anti-historical mode of existence—the mode by which, as Lacy describes it, “all time is as one, eternally now, whereas we must see it as past, present,

future, as in a history” (143)—through a female trinity and Mr. Bartholomew, an over-emotional, impotent man suspected of homosexuality and unable to comply with scholarly, rational discipline. In contrast with this feminized alternative to rational knowledge of the past, Ayscough stands as a figure for fact- and source-based history.

This difference and its formulation as a male-female polarization is dramatized during Ayscough’s deposition of Rebecca, especially in their exchange regarding the place of women in Christian theology. When Rebecca asserts women’s equality with men in the eyes of God, Ayscough accuses her of “a new vice” in place of her prostitution: “to fly in the face of all our forefathers have in their wisdom told us we must believe; there hast thou malignantly found shot to weight a base resentment” (424). He calls her “unwomanly” and vengeful, assuming that her actions (like his) stem in a straightforward and rational way from her view of the past. Instead, she responds with a utopian view to the future: “Most in this world is unjust by act of man, not of Our Lord Jesus Christ. Change that is my purpose” (424). The two characters differ so fundamentally at this point that Ayscough stares in silence and then simply accuses her of lying; he cannot assimilate this perspective or even respond to her reading of the creation stories of Genesis, which she has presented as evidence for her argument. Where a lawyer, like a historian, must rely upon knowledge of the past, Rebecca rejects that past and looks to a radically new future.

Rebecca embodies two challenges to historical knowledge: that of an anti-historical mode of knowing and being, but also that of the evasive and mysterious past itself. She is the source of all our knowledge about the events in the cave but is also the source of all our confusion regarding them. And she is aligned with unaccountable human

history rather than with rational historical knowledge through her sex; we meet her, the narrator informs us, in “one of those periods when Clio seems to stop and scratch her tousled head, and wonder where the devil to go next from here” (11). The past is thus imagined as a coy “Clio” who, like Rebecca, is pursued by masculine historical knowers: Ayscough and his clerk, of course, but also the narrator and the masculine readers Fowles so often seems to assume. The narrator acts as a historian both by executing unspoken principles of selection and organization in compiling this archive, and by delivering factual information and historical arguments in the novel’s narrative and dissertative sections. Readers are furthermore invited to historical reasoning: presented with an enticingly unknown event and an archive, we are prompted to sift through accounts and perform document analysis in an effort to discover the truth that eludes Ayscough. This truth, as the narrator interrupts their argument about women’s place in society to remind us, disappears inside Rebecca: “Neither soft nor hard words would break her, reveal the enigma she hid: what really happened” (425). All of these positions—lawyer, scribe, narrator, reader—are associated with a desire to penetrate the mysteries of womanly Rebecca, effeminate Mr. Bartholomew, and the womb-like cave, even if that desire is carefully frustrated by the novel.

Nor does the novel simply set up this desire for a factual past in order to explode it. Rebecca is ultimately as flawed as Ayscough as a model for relating to the past; adulating the memory of her abuser, she often seems less a genuine, powerful prophet than a simple, misguided victim. On one hand, Fowles here and in his other works throws his full weight behind an artistic, mystic way of understanding the past and present—the ethically and aesthetically superior approach he sees in both Shakerism and the novel—as

opposed to the search for literal truth he embodies so distastefully in Ayscough and his efforts to serve the status quo at any human cost. On the other hand, though, *A Maggot*'s representation of Rebecca not just as a woman outside historical time (in her faith) but also as history's pointedly feminine victim (properly named from our—and above all Fowles's—position of superior realism), deeply undermines the novel's support of this alternative to historiography.

The epigraph establishes Fowles's atheism and distrust of established religion, but the novel has already hinted at the delusion under which a passionately Christian Rebecca must operate. In her second account of the events in the cave, Rebecca witnesses what she cannot identify and bases her theology on misunderstandings. Her glimpse of utopia, which prompts the details of her new faith, takes place in the “maggot” at the heart of the historical mystery and is a tissue of misidentifications. Like an airplane or spacecraft, the hovering maggot extends stairs and rests on thin legs for the characters to board; its pilot “touche[s] her finger upon a precious stone beside her” to retract the stairs and close the door, and soon a window or screen appears to show a view from the sky. The interior space, with “panels upon the ceiling that gave a hidden light,” is covered in glowing jewels, many with “signs or marks” or “small clocks or pocket-watches beside them, yet the hands moved not” (365). The anachronistic vision of this narrative both validates the sincerity of Rebecca's testimony to readers—how could she make up something so far outside her frame of reference?—and renders it absurd to both Ayscough and readers.

Reluctant to accept this machine's invasion of the otherwise realistically-rendered eighteenth century, and unable to assimilate all the documents' details into a single coherent narrative (Why would kindly female scientists from the future leave Rebecca

naked in the cave?), a reader is prompted to see Rebecca's Christianity as an earnest misunderstanding but simultaneously to doubt the narrator's sincerity. In providing these futuristic details, the narrator seems to offer data only the narrator and readers (in our shared superior knowledge) can interpret properly, but places them in a context that nonetheless remains unreadable to us. Like Ayscough and like White's and de Certeau's historians, the narrator distinguishes between what Rebecca genuinely believes to be the truth and "the substantial truth of what has passed" (435): even as Fowles uses Rebecca's faith as a stand-in for the artist's ability to think outside the limitations of chronology and Enlightenment rationality, he regards her with the same patronizing and superficial gaze he earlier directed at Sarah in *The French Lieutenant's Woman*. And while Rebecca's approach is far more appealing and ethically productive than Ayscough's, the narrator makes it quite clear that it is not accurate, that its mysticism is based in delusion rather than in a genuine contact with God (since Fowles's is an explicitly godless world) or an informed creative leap.

In de Certeau's understanding, which seems to mirror that of *A Maggot*, to write history is to claim "the power to keep the past" (215)—a power Fowles seems to desire and mistrust very much as he both claims and forswears the authority of literary authorship in *The French Lieutenant's Woman*. Accordingly, and like *Orlando* before it, *A Maggot* critiques not just a specific historical tradition but every familiar mode of historical existence and knowledge—factual and fictional, historical and mystic, literal and figurative—even as it draws upon all of these approaches. In its particular historical context, *A Maggot*'s inability to stake a claim suggests the cultural power of polarizing historical debates, according to which we must accept *either* historians' absolute,



unproblematic access to the past *or* the loss of all meaningful historical knowledge; it also paints the choice itself as bankrupt. Unable to think outside these limiting terms, this novel nonetheless critiques them, even against the instructions of its own paratext.

In this latter sense, *A Maggot* follows in the path of the Claudius novels and not that of *Orlando*. It engages historical-epistemological debates despite itself, striving through its paratext to keep its fiction away from contentious extra-fictional realities. Where *Orlando* works to effect reflection upon and changes in the scholarly discourses that exclude actual women, joking but seriously contesting their exclusive “power to keep the past,” *A Maggot* plays more reluctantly with the charged line between fiction and history. And, not at all incidentally but in ways that intimately connect its vision of gender difference and its historical imagination, the latter leaves quite untouched gender stereotypes that imagine women as enigmatic Madonna-and-whore symbols outside rational human history. The gendering of historical knowledge and action matters not only in Woolf’s and Fowles’s novels but also in the history of disciplinary history, and in popular notions of the past and how we know it; the following chapter thus looks more closely at this complicated and troubling gendering in two postmodernist fictions.

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## CHAPTER FIVE

### History's Others:

#### Femininity and Historiographic Critique in *Waterland* and *The Newton Letter*

Until now, a historian has been the embodiment of universal truth, who, constructed from bits of psychological detail and out of the purifying trials dealt by the contingencies of daily life, human passion, and devouring women, emerges as a genderless genius with a name that radiates extraordinary power. It is time to begin thinking about the ways in which this authorial presence has in fact been gendered as masculine.

- Bonnie G. Smith, *The Gender of History* (101)

As the preceding chapter suggests, John Fowles's *A Maggot* (1985) delineates historical logic through multiple historian figures placed in opposition to an anti-historian figure, the religious mystic Rebecca. In his final novel as in his earlier work, Fowles employs gender difference to express absolute otherness, positing a woman as a mysterious enigma to the (presumably masculine) narrator and readers. Yet this trope of the woman-outside-history is far from a personal quirk on Fowles's part: historical knowledge has long been imagined in highly gendered terms by not only novelists but also professional historians and their disciplinary and extra-disciplinary audiences. And since the explosions of women's history in the 1970s and of gender history in the 1980s, historians have become increasingly self-reflective regarding scholars' as well as historical actors' embeddedness in historically-contingent gender roles. This chapter examines relationships amongst constructions of masculinity, femininity, history, and fiction through two novels whose male historian narrators, like the historians of *A*

*Maggot*, define themselves against women who neither practice nor are accommodated by historical logic: John Banville's *The Newton Letter* (1982) and Graham Swift's *Waterland* (1983). It follows up on the symbolic weight of Rebecca's sex, situating gestures like Fowles's within a decade when an influential historiographic movement attacked the idea of ahistorical womanhood upon which they rely.

By foregrounding a relationship between women and history, *The Newton Letter* and *Waterland* engage significant changes within the discipline at the time of their publication. During the 1980s, historians began to theorize the insights of women's historians such as Joan Kelly and Gerda Lerner, dramatically extending the previous decade's work by employing gender as an analytic tool rather than solely as a topic of analysis in historical studies.<sup>51</sup> This conceptual expansion took place throughout the 1980s in publications including Joan Wallach Scott's *Gender and the Politics of History* (1988, collecting essays originally published 1983-8); Natalie Zemon Davis's "Gender and Genre: Women as Historical Writers, 1400-1820" (1980) and *The Return of Martin Guerre* (1983); and Catherine Hall and Leonore Davidoff's *Family Fortunes* (1987).<sup>52</sup> Clearly, *Waterland* and *The Newton Letter* were produced during an era of new attention to women's history and especially to the role of gender in historical analysis. Their

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<sup>51</sup> More specifically, according to Joan Wallach Scott, gender history "extends the focus of women's history by attending to male/female relationships and to questions about how gender is perceived, what the processes are that establish gendered institutions, and to the differences that race, class, and sexuality have made in the historical experiences of women" (57).

<sup>52</sup> Though this dissertation focuses on interactions between fiction and the history of *British* historiography, the rise of women's history and then gender history were transnational exchanges, drawing upon the insights of American, British, and continental historians and theorists. Of the authors invoked here, Scott, Davis, and Bonnie G. Smith (discussed later in this section) are American, Hall and Davidoff British.

preoccupations resound deeply with these historiographic developments *without* fitting neatly into them.

Nor do the two novels share a position on the intersection of gender and history, though both appear obsessed with it. While the budding field of gender history approached gender as historically contingent and variable—as a powerful social construct—*Waterland* projects images of ahistorical womanhood and is thus fundamentally at odds with the approach. On the other hand, *The Newton Letter* is far more self-conscious of its own use of gendered imagery, showing up its historian narrator for imagining women outside and in opposition to historical thought. Yet *The Newton Letter* is not a work of gender history but rather a fictional historian's text; it uses its narrative stance to reflect upon what it means for a scholar to appropriate femininity as his negative image, rather than working to understand the construction of gender at a given historical moment. Both novels use gender (and, more specifically, visions of female sexuality) in an exploration of historical knowers and their narratives rather than as the object of historical inquiry.

These novels not only echo the birth of gender history (however obliquely) but also foreshadow Bonnie G. Smith's work on gender's role in the birth of disciplinary history—though *Waterland* does so far less self-consciously than *The Newton Letter*. In her 1998 *The Gender of History: Men, Women, and Historical Practice*, Smith contends that conventional historical discourse is highly gendered even as it constructs itself as a universal and transparent reflection of the past. She identifies 'the gender of history' at the level of methodology, as historians defined themselves as professionals in opposition to "a low, unworthy, and trivial 'other'" (9): women amateurs, who were excluded from

the newly-developing system of university seminars and from access to increasingly-vital archival materials. At the level of content, too, historians tended to devalue the female and the feminine as “superficial, trivial, and extraneous detail” (150); the domestic, the private, the everyday, and the bodily were coded feminine and set aside from history’s aspirations to universal truth. Male historians thus defined disciplinary history and its procedures largely without the input of, and in negative reference to, women; this groundwork would later be challenged by Kelly, Lerner, Scott, Davis, Hall, Davidoff, and many other late-twentieth-century scholars working in the new fields of women’s history and gender history—as well as, through its critique of its self-centered and sexist historian narrator, *The Newton Letter*. At the same time, these associations of femininity with meaningless day-to-day realities and with a situatedness inhospitable to objective knowledge retained enormous power within and especially outside the discipline, as *Waterland* shows so clearly.

In the connections they forge between gender and history, *The Newton Letter* and *Waterland* perform the difficulty of pinning down a historical mainstream at a time of crisis and change, suggesting once again the non-linearity of historical knowledge and its history. In this chapter, I trace the continuing impact of the gendered building blocks of historical practice in the 1980s as it is evidenced in these two history- and gender-obsessed fictions. To very different effects, I argue, both novels invite their readers to historical-epistemological critique through gendered terms: while *Waterland* accepts the traditional gendering of history but uses it to question the realism of conventional historiography, *The Newton Letter* is prescient in connecting history with critiques of scientific objectivity as gendered.

This chapter's first section identifies in *Waterland* a tension between nostalgia for and a postmodernist rejection of past ways of knowing. The novel joins its historian narrator in longing for an imagined past from a position of dissatisfied skepticism, mournfully discarding the simplicity of universally true historiography in the form of a linear progress narrative. This tension plays out along gendered lines: *Waterland*, I claim, achieves its new wisdom with recourse to an essentialized and timeless femininity. Neither conventional historical narrative nor extra-disciplinary flight of fancy proves adequate to the task of understanding the past, but this idea of womanhood as disciplinary history's other allows the novel to slip back and forth between two opposed possibilities instead of finally abandoning the old Grand Narrative historiography for which it is so deeply nostalgic. In *Waterland*, postmodernist doubt and fragmentation thus coexist with a vision of past confidence and coherence through the shared ground of women's enigmatic bodies.

The second section then turns to *The Newton Letter* and its greater differentiation between historian narrator and implied author, arguing that this novel troubles scientific and historical objectivity in gendered terms. Both novels' historian narrators imagine their own minds in opposition to and threatened by archetypes of femininity and by the messiness of real female bodies, but *The Newton Letter* suggests that these images are the projections of a man blinded by his own self-centeredness. Its postmodernist approach to historical thought—its breaking down of those Enlightenment binaries Alan Munslow lists as “knower and known, observer and observed, subject and object, form and content, and fact [...] and value” (189)—directs itself at gender's role in the construction of historical truth by underscoring gender's role in a historian's delusive sense of his own



disembodied mind. After tracing this critical distance through *The Newton Letter*'s structure as well as its plot, the chapter considers the implications of these novels' historical-epistemological engagements for my broader understanding of the narrative stance of fictional historians' texts. Despite their considerable differences, both novels foreground the role of the historian in historical knowledge by speaking the voices of historians. This similarity suggests both the limitations and the potential of such fictional engagements with disciplinary history, which dramatize tensions they cannot resolve and raise questions they cannot answer.

### **Rethinking History through Women's Bodies in *Waterland***

Through a historian narrator who has come to doubt the promise he once saw in historical explanation, *Waterland* asks its readers to think critically about familiar notions of narrative and objectivity. The novel is composed of history teacher Tom Crick's farewell lectures to his students and, more abstractly, to a confident understanding of the past. In its place, this doubting historian models for his students and readers a postmodernist realization: that lived reality, which he calls "the Here and Now," does not conform neatly to rationality or teleology. Struggling aloud with his memories, Tom perceives the power of storytelling and the impossibility of objectively selecting a narrative form in which to emplot a given set of events. Like postmodernist historians and philosophers of history, *Waterland* foregrounds the roles of selection and rhetoric in historiography, rejecting a modernist view of writing as transparent reporting. And also like postmodernist scholars, Tom becomes intensely self-conscious about his perspective and methodology. He loses confidence in the ultimate accessibility of the truth about the

past and begins to doubt the stability of his most cherished assumptions. And yet a vision of universal, unchanging femininity retains great power within the novel. Essentializing images of womanhood and particularly of female sexuality prove strikingly resilient in the face of the novel's postmodernist theoretical gestures and formal characteristics—because, as I argue in this section, they do the novel's historical-epistemological work. By helping to unsettle categories *Waterland* privileges over gender, visions of women outside history thus become naturalized rather than critiqued in this history-minded text.

Accordingly, women appear in this novel as evocative symbols rather than as complex, thinking characters. The narrator represents his Victorian ancestress Sarah Atkinson, for instance, entirely in reference to her reproductive capacity and her relationships with men—daughter, wife, mother; a great beauty, idealized and beaten by her husband. While she remains an ordinary, living woman, Sarah's life enters the novel as a trivial sketch: she is pretty, she is a devoted wife, she chooses fashionable clothes, she pays social calls and goes on walks while her husband makes the more noteworthy decisions involved in commerce, politics, and land reclamation. Sarah becomes powerful only when she stops being an ordinary woman and becomes a symbol for innocent womanhood wronged, frozen in time after her husband knocks her headfirst into a writing-table; once her remorseful husband, their sons, and the townspeople are free to project myths and fantasies onto this silenced figure, Sarah takes on a great deal more significance in the story. In her new capacity of Woman, Sarah serves Tom as a springboard for his own obsessions, his rethinking of historical truth.

As Tom describes reports that Sarah haunted the flood that occurred after her 1874 funeral, he muses: “Do not ghosts prove—even rumours, whispers, stories of

ghosts—that the past clings, that we are always going back ...?” (103). Tom appropriates Sarah’s story as one more way to ask “What is the point of history? Why history? Why the past?” (106). And as this example suggests, *Waterland* has a habit of using voiceless female bodies, images of women trapped in a stable past, as tools for its interrogation of historical meaning and methodology. My point is that Tom’s essentializing, binary treatment of gender paradoxically contributes to the novel’s destabilizing, critical treatment of historical concepts such as objectivity, causality, factuality, and linearity. *Waterland*’s postmodernist epistemological critique is based upon the same essentializing notions of ‘the feminine’—the same images of nature, chaos, cyclical reproduction, and emptiness waiting to be filled—that also facilitated the formation of the discipline and the foundation of its authority, and away from which gender history seeks to move.

*Waterland* unsettles absolute statements about the nature of history and enacts postmodernist skepticism regarding universal truth, while simultaneously reinforcing a system that masculinizes historical knowledge and feminizes its mysterious alternative—and in which masculinity and femininity work as absolute and universal categories. Indeed, it uses its postmodernist instability to reimagine and reevaluate—over and over—the relationship between, and the relative value of, masculine “History” and the feminine “Here and Now.” Readers are prompted to identify with Tom’s navigation of a tricky world as we navigate this tricky text, confronted with an unsettled temporality in which memory is ever-changing and the past and present both affect each other; alongside Tom, we struggle to make sense of the data in front of us, shifting amongst various ways to emplot the events as the novel proves generically unstable and plays with forms including autobiography, history, realist historical fiction, the Gothic novel, and the *bildungsroman*.

But while *Waterland* employs the formal techniques of literary postmodernism to question the privileging of historical narrative order over messy reality, it does not use them to deconstruct those binaries or their gender coding. Instead, gendered dichotomies facilitate the novel's critique of a dry scholarship that flees from both murky day-to-day realities and extralogical phenomena—from love and sex, from Sarah's madness and hauntings, from the formless potential Tom imagines in wetlands and wombs.

*Waterland* thus leaves intact the assumption that men make history while women's bodies exist outside history in a state of nature and archetype, preserving a conceptual framework strikingly like the one Smith identifies in the nineteenth-century process of historical disciplinization. As Johann Gustav Droysen worked to develop the seminar system, for instance, he identified “the active manliness of the seminar man with history/time as a whole and posed it as the opposite of nature/space” (Smith 113); Droysen and his contemporaries imagined historical time as “a neutral, mathematical, unmarked time matching the transparency of both the citizen and professional historian and contrasting with the thick sluggishness of feminine space” (Smith 151). In other words, in the stable narrative tradition of historiography Tom so desires *as well as in his critique* of that tradition's viability, the natural, cyclical, marsh-like female body serves as the negative against which men's minds define and produce ever-progressing history. By inverting rather than deconstructing this conventional dichotomy, *Waterland* allows itself to critique confident historical narrative without exploding its foundations.

This effect becomes especially apparent through Ernst Van Alphen's sympathetic reading of *Waterland* “as a theory of history,” a reading that oversimplifies Tom's conflicted position into an intellectual progress narrative but nonetheless sheds light on

Tom's construction of his historical-epistemological options. According to Van Alphen, Tom distinguishes between traditional histories that "follow the line of linear progression, represented in *Waterland* as male," and "[h]istories with a cyclical structure, shaped in this novel with the help of female sexuality" (209). He argues that Tom ultimately rejects a masculine-coded Grand Narrative historical tradition in favor of history writing that embraces "the intensity which provokes story telling" (208), an intensity intimately tied to female characters' sexuality and to the feminized, sexualized landscape of the Fens. In other words, the novel increasingly values the feminine as Tom learns postmodernist skepticism through his personal and professional crises, his contact with "the Here and Now." However, as Van Alphen's language makes plain, Tom's understanding of female sexuality remains deeply problematic and itself goes unchallenged within *Waterland*. Whether or not Tom finally chooses a feminine alternative to masculine history, the very framing of these alternatives protects a conventional gendering of history.

Furthermore, by placing women in service of this abstract epistemological dichotomy, the novel imagines not only Sarah Atkinson but all its female characters as archetypes more than as people. Sarah's story illustrates the symbolic role of femininity in *Waterland*, as her existence outside historical time and logic helps prompt Tom's concern about the limitations of scholarly historical discourse. This ancestress's image facilitates Tom's pursuit of a history in which "the past clings," a history that embraces a recursive rather than a linear temporality. But Tom does not only appropriate long-dead women in formulating his theories of history. To the contrary, his wife Mary provides the text's richest example of a woman understood in opposition to the historian's masculine pursuit of rational knowledge—rather than, of course, as a fully human individual.

Many years before, Tom tells us, his girlfriend Mary became pregnant, aborted the pregnancy, disappeared into her father's home for three mysterious years, and then married him; Tom portrays these events insofar as they lead ultimately to his dual loss of a teaching post and of confidence in historical explanation. Mary's sexuality and later infertility seemed under control to Tom, but he now suspects they have simmered inside her all along, posing secret threats to his sense of historical truth. According to his interpretation, Mary suddenly regresses into her adolescent Catholicism and into womanly instincts she had repressed through her abortion; in his distress over her changing behavior, Tom diverges from the curriculum, telling his students stories about his traumatic personal past in the Fens rather than recounting the officially-sanctioned history of the French Revolution. Mary thus casts the narrator (and his students and readers) back into Tom's adolescence and further, into his genealogy and a history of the Fens from the seventeenth century. And when Mary steals a baby from a mother at a grocery store because she believes God has promised her a child, the experience throws Tom into an epistemological tailspin. Furthermore, the scandal gives Tom's history-hating headmaster the excuse he has been seeking to reduce the subject's role in his school. On a practical level, then, Mary's youthful sexuality (which begat a pregnancy which begat an abortion which begat infertility which begat baby-snatching) severs Tom's official control over historical knowledge by getting him sacked.

But that same irresistible female sexuality prompted Tom's need for history in the first place. His decision to study, write, and teach history emerged largely from the events surrounding Mary's pregnancy, when:

a series of encounters with the Here and Now gave a sudden pointedness to my studies. [...] So I began to demand of history an Explanation. [...]

And can I deny that what I wanted all along was not some golden nugget that history would at last yield up, but History itself: the Grand Narrative, the filler of vacuums, the dispeller of fears of the dark? (62)

Mary's sexuality and reproductive organs simultaneously function as the mystery to be explained by history and as the mystery that threatens to destroy history's satisfyingly linear narratives. This tension surfaces in Tom's attitudes regarding the quintessentially Victorian Grand Narrative tradition: he displays nostalgia for such comforting traditions of narrative and historiography, but also knowingly and self-consciously depicts their pre-postmodern epistemological confidence as impossible and as impossibly naïve. Indeed, Tom both exhibits and reflects skeptically upon a series of nostalgias: for his youth; for an ability to idealize that youth; for his once-simple faith in knowledge, progress, and rationality. Although Tom begins his narrative by offering his students "the complete and final version" (8), he is all too quickly caught in the impossibility of one true story, with its just divvying up of responsibility and its clear path of causality. And once again we find Mary at the heart of Tom's historiographic dilemma: whereas Tom once saw history as an evidence-based "demand for explanation" and "seeking of reasons," Mary's actions impress him with the force of the inexplicable and make him feel he is "really only telling a —": cutting himself off, he leaves readers to fill in the troubling word 'story' (106-9).<sup>53</sup>

Despite all this doubt, Tom clings to historical explanation because he believes it makes us human by helping us understand and order a chaotic world. Yet despite this

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<sup>53</sup> Tom's desire for a past epistemological certainty is a perfect example of—and illuminated usefully by—Amy J. Elias's study of post-1960s historical fiction. My approach to the novel is in many ways indebted to Elias's thesis that these fictions regard "positivist or stadialist history as the historical sublime, a desired horizon that can never be reached but only approached in attempts to understand human origins and the meaning of lived existence" (xviii).

equation of historical thought with fully realized humanity, Tom imagines women as outside history. Indeed, in the novel's symbolic system, the chaotic world is itself associated with female bodies and set in opposition to male minds. Instead of representing Mary as a person conducting her own search for explanations, accordingly, Tom views her in terms of his own search—as at once responsible for his need for and his loss of a career and faith in history. And when he finds his fifty-two year old wife at home holding a baby and insisting on a religious narrative outside historical logic, Tom insists that she “explain” (268); in the context of Tom's larger account, this request is not only perfectly reasonable (he does finally retrieve enough data to return the child to a distraught mother) but also symbolically loaded. After all, Tom informs us, such a desire for rational explanation requires that we “carry round with us this cumbersome but precious bag of clues called History” (106)—but Tom curiously excludes his wife from this pursuit he views as basic to humanity. Mary is historically significant because her sexuality prompts a series of events with which the male historian's rationality must cope, and which allow his historical sense to mature; like Sarah, however, Mary herself seems not quite human and ultimately loses her mind.

By habitually associating women with utter irrationality, *Waterland* gives femininity enormous symbolic power but erases women's ability to launch their own intellectual projects or to take an active part in reshaping historiography. Mary is a permanently “empty vessel” reverting to what Tom sees as a childish, superstitious religious faith, and this interpretation is affirmed by Mary's obviously objectionable behavior in abducting the child. Like Rebecca in *A Maggot*, Mary creates a narrative according to a spiritual rather than a historical logic; like Rebecca, she thus functions as



an anti-historian figure, as the other knowledge against which Tom's forms itself. Yet unlike Rebecca, Mary does not voice a genuine alternative to historical conventions and their relationship with patriarchal forms of authority; to the contrary, she hardly speaks, frightens an innocent young mother, and ends up institutionalized.

Rather, it is Mary's body and the symbolic weight he attributes to it—not her spirituality—that poses a true threat to Tom's belief in rational knowledge and progress. Tom imagines the female body a figure for the horrifying emptiness of reality, which humans attempt to fill by making and telling history. He renders the spiritual physical and indeed sexual through his language in describing (what he sees as) Mary's struggle with this reality: he imagines that her unsavory dependence on the idea of God “must have been always there [...] ripening like some dormant, forgotten seed.” Tom envisions the ripening of this seed as an infidelity on Mary's part and holds it responsible for his inability to teach the grand (or at the very least coherent) narratives of proper history, his need to tell instead what he calls “these believe-it-or-not-but-it-happened Tales of the Fens” (42). Mary is “an empty but fillable vessel” (42) not only physically but also in terms of her meaning—or rather, for this historian, her meaning is reduced entirely to the physical nature he interprets as the unfulfilled potential of an empty vessel. Like Sarah, she exists less as a convincing, three-dimensional individual than as a malleable feminine stereotype, a projection of the narrator's own fears of “vacuums” and “the dark” (62).

As an evocative site of absences rather than as a particular presence, Mary is also joined with a powerful and feminized landscape in service of her husband's historical-epistemological growth. Tom's understanding of reality as flat, random emptiness is influenced by his Fenland youth and studies, his familiarity with a landscape that

unceasingly returns to marshy uniformity even as men attempt (like the God of Genesis) to separate water from land. The novel insistently describes both the Fens and female sexuality as extrahistorical phenomena—as forces that, as George P. Landow explains, “resist all ideological, narrative control, that refuse to be shaped by stories we tell” (202). This relationship between Tom’s visions of a mysteriously fluid and formless landscape, on one hand, and of women’s mysteriously damp and hollow sexual organs, on the other, helps to explain Tom’s ability to see Mary as simultaneously responsible for virtually everything but innocent and unchanging. The novel insistently compares female bodies with a landscape it describes in terms of shapeshifting and contradiction (above all, as both water and land): as Pamela Cooper explains, “the Fenlands mediate the contradictions of history [...] with metonymic reference to woman’s body as ambiguous terrain” (372). In associating Mary’s body with a landscape so enigmatic and extralogical, and in pinning Mary’s entire symbolic and historical significance to her body, *Waterland* positions her as an endlessly flexible tool for Tom’s (and the novel’s, and readers’) theoretical speculations.

In launching its historiographic critique, *Waterland* depends upon and further circulates images of rational, masculine history and natural, female sexuality. While Van Alphen seems correct in suggesting that the text often privileges the second rather than the first of these terms, this inversion nonetheless leaves the troubling dichotomy intact: privileging the womb does not help Mary gain a fair hearing, or grant her visibility as a three-dimensional character like Tom himself, or move toward historicizing our understanding of gender, or encourage critical thinking about conceptions of women’s roles and value. Instead, it helps Tom explore alternative modes of historical

understanding, authorship, and existence. *Waterland* thus questions universalizing historical procedures in a way that precludes the questioning of equally embedded and universalizing procedures of gendering. It renders its narrator a wiser and more epistemologically savvy historian—exploring what he posits as *the* alternative to objective truth, continuity, and progress—and it does that by invoking gender stereotypes strikingly similar to those relied upon by nineteenth-century men of history.

### **The Unsympathetic Historian as Site of Critique in *The Newton Letter***

The gendered binaries at the heart of *Waterland*'s historical-epistemological questioning also take center stage in *The Newton Letter*. Both novels speak the voices of historians losing their grasps on historical thought, and both narrators connect this lack of officially sanctioned historical discourse with women's sex organs. This section explores the *Newton Letter* narrator's imaginative uses of gender difference, which functions here as in *Waterland* to delineate disciplinary history in opposition to a femininity that accommodates the irrationality of both the spiritual and the bodily. But *The Newton Letter* does not sanction its narrator's conceptual schemas; rather, I assert, this novel ironizes the historian's conceptual appropriation of women. Rather than steadily supporting the binary that allows Tom to waffle between privileging "History" and "the Here and Now" as it does in *Waterland*, the enduring convention by which scholarly reason is masculine—and everything else is feminine—becomes the object of pointed questioning in this text.

*The Newton Letter* comprises a series of letters from an unnamed historian explaining how, though he retreated to a house in the Irish countryside in an attempt to

finish his book on Isaac Newton, the details of life keep getting in his way. And here again, life takes an emphatically feminine form when it interrupts authoritative historical discourse. This narrator's representations of female characters closely mirror Tom's, but with a vital difference: whereas Tom's superior (though self-consciously limited) rationality is endorsed by Mary's baby-snatching, the *Newton Letter* narrator virtually never turns out to have been either factually or ethically in the right. Instead of a faithful husband to a mentally ill criminal, the *Newton Letter* narrator is a womanizer. Of the two women he meets upon reaching his scholarly retreat, he quickly falls in love with unattainable, dark Charlotte and begins a sexual relationship with her blonde niece Otilie, constantly foregrounding a struggle between his abstract intellectual pursuits and what he perceives as Otilie's intense physicality.<sup>54</sup>

He behaves poorly toward each—imagining Charlotte while having sex with Otilie, for instance, and declaring his love for Charlotte immediately after finding her husband Edward collapsed on the drawing-room floor. But the more fundamental problem is that he cannot see these women or their lives. Time and time again, readers watch the narrator's conceptual frameworks exploded by unavoidable facts—the family he has imagined as Protestants go to Mass, and his “entire conception of them had to be revised” (54); after arbitrarily deciding that the young boy in the house is the product of

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<sup>54</sup> Ruth Frehner's reading of the narrator's representation of Otilie's body effectively illustrates her intertwined functions as the physical other to his intellect, the object of his gaze, and a door to the ordinary. In analyzing her body and imagining not only “breast and bum and blonde lap” but internal organs (Banville 26), the narrator's “gaze is an X-ray, yet he implicitly accuses her of exposing too much, of leaving his imagination with no secrets to feed on” (Frehner 55). His description of their first sexual encounter “highlights the narrator's erudition. Otilie's body supplies his imagination with a prompt” (55). The narrator, both drawn to the ordinariness represented by this woman's body and repelled by it, represents himself as a mind in contrast to Otilie's body and heart.

an affair between a very young Otilie and her uncle Edward, he is genuinely surprised to learn he is simply Charlotte's adopted son; he cannot understand that Edward is dying of cancer—despite countless hints—until he is told outright at the end of the novel; he finally learns that the vague inaccessibility he had so idealized in Charlotte was the result of tranquilizers rather than a refined spiritual melancholy. Rather than perceiving Otilie or Charlotte as real people, the narrator projects upon them all the dangers of murky day-to-day reality (Otilie) and aesthetic, spiritual experience (Charlotte) to the ideally disinterested and disembodied scholarly mind. Like Tom's representations of Mary and Sarah, then, this historian's representations of Charlotte and Otilie participate in a larger system of gendered knowledge by which objectivity implies masculinity. Yet the novels differ significantly in their relationship with that system, because of *Waterland*'s implicit endorsement of Tom as a figure of authority and wisdom in contrast to *The Newton Letter*'s more critical representation of its historian narrator.

Although both historian narrators sometimes contradict themselves or otherwise belie their own intellectual and moral flaws, their unreliability is not equivalent: the well-meaning but deluded and distraught Tom Crick is different from the willfully ignorant voice of *The Newton Letter*. Even the fact of the former's name and the latter's namelessness suggests the novels' distinct presentations of their narrators. Whereas *Waterland* offers a sense of deeply personal contact with Tom through emotional accounts of his life from childhood to middle age, *The Newton Letter* begins and ends with a nameless, featureless set of eyes—a self-obsessed narrator who elicits neither fondness nor forgiveness. Otilie, despite the narrator's tendency to portray her as a bumbling innocent, is incredibly insightful in saying that she sometimes imagines he is

“just a voice, a name—no, not even that, just the voice, going on” (67):<sup>55</sup> furthermore, because the narrator hardly exists to readers beyond his obviously-flawed gaze, interpretation, and language, this voice is little more than its own unreliability. Rather than using gendered images as tools in its historical-epistemological questioning, *The Newton Letter* questions the gendering of history itself by connecting its narrator’s ethical and epistemological shortcomings to his perception of female sexuality as everything history and rationality are not.

This difference in gender’s role—as conceptual tool for historical-epistemological reflection in *Waterland* and as a central component of a critiqued historical-epistemological system in *The Newton Letter*—emerges partly through the different structural positions of women (or, rather, of the narrator’s projections of womanhood) within the texts. In *Waterland*, Tom projects history’s shifting others onto particular female characters, most notably Mary and Sarah; the novel also indicates the threat and promise of femininity through female sexuality’s actions upon the plot. But in *The Newton Letter*, such otherness is projected not only onto *parts* of the novel (Charlotte, Otilie, and the narrator’s inability to finish his historical biography) but also through the *entire* novel in its rhetorical stance. Whereas Tom speaks to both male and female students but clearly has the resistant young man Price in mind, the *Newton Letter* narrator

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<sup>55</sup> The narrator is resistant to the idea of Otilie as possibly a source of insight or as contradictory to his preconceptions about himself and his relationship with the world. Derek Hand notes an especially dramatic example of this resistance when he argues that “It is only when Otilie directly confronts the historian’s version of events, telling him that, ‘You don’t know anything. You think you are so clever, but you don’t know a thing,’ that he begins to question his own assumptions” (55). But the narrator does not welcome such questioning, and Otilie’s “affront to the historian’s author(ity) produces an unexpected and violent outburst in the historian: he slaps her hard across the face” (55).

pens his letters to an emphatically female figure whose ambiguity of symbolic and literal reference places gender front and center. Not an incidental though powerful tool in some larger project, this projected femininity thus frames the whole account and its unreliability.

The narrator's letters address a shadowy Clio whose identity or nature is never revealed: is she history personified, a muse, a lover, a friend, a colleague?<sup>56</sup> Certainly the novella's opening, and the choice of the name Clio in a novel narrated by a historian, call to mind an invocation of the muse as well as a farewell to a feminized History: "Words fail me, Clio. How did you track me down, did I leave bloodstains in the snow? I won't try to apologise. Instead, I want simply to explain, so that we both might understand. [...] I have abandoned my book" (1). However, as the text progresses the addressee becomes not only Clio but also "dear Cliona" (2), a particular woman rather than a mythical figure. The narrator sometimes addresses her quite personally in reference to his scholarly work or lack of it: "Remember that mad letter Newton wrote to John Locke in September of 1693, accusing the philosopher out of the blue of being immoral, and a Hobbist, and of having tried to embroil him with women?" (5), he asks in one letter, and in another he thanks her for a book. Nor does this duality encompass the addressee's multiplicity. As Ruth Frehner points out, while her nickname Clio invokes Greek mythology, the addressee's full name—Cliona—points to an Irish figure of love and seduction. The

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<sup>56</sup> While several critics have referred in passing to the novella's addressee, none has yet explored the implications of this conflation of history and woman. Indeed, the majority of critics, including Brian McIlroy (123), Joseph McMinn (89), Geert Lernout (75), and Derek Hand (58), take for granted that the addressee is the muse of history. Although some critics, including Rüdiger Imhof, do acknowledge that "Clio" seems to refer both to history and to an actual, contemporary woman (150-1), this multiplicity of reference duality has so far remained parenthetical in criticism of the text.

name is an Anglicization of Clíodhna, who according to some versions is a goddess who seduces men and transports them to the otherworld at the risk of their lives. Thus, no fewer than three female referents—the Greek muse personifying history, an ordinary woman with an interest in the narrator’s scholarly success, and this Celtic violator of boundaries—operate simultaneously as the addressee of the narrator’s letters.

By implicating a vaguely-imagined woman in the very production and reception of its narrative, *The Newton Letter* depicts its narrator’s discourse as inextricably embedded in conventional yet contradictory ideals of femininity as they interact with historical knowledge. This composite figure is obviously unlike Otilie and Charlotte in their total and straightforward otherness to history, since she incorporates a conventional symbol for historical knowledge and a real-life woman scholar as well as a threateningly otherworldly seductress. Yet the narrator seems unable to make such distinctions, slipping amongst female figures in a way that calls attention to the slippage within each of these figures: between Clio-as-goddess and Clio-as-symbol in standing for history, between professional and personal when the narrator offers intimate details about his sexual experiences and fantasies to a woman who apparently has discussed only academic questions with him and sent him a scholarly book, and between the otherworld and this world in legends surrounding Cliona. This messiness participates in the narrator’s larger tendency to conflate women, most dramatically exposed when he begins to conceptualize Otilie during sex as “neither herself nor the other, but a third—Charlottilie!” (48). The narrator is chronically unable or unwilling to distinguish amongst individual women, or between real women and imaginary ones—whether between colleagues and goddesses or between the actual Charlotte and Otilie and his flights of



fancy about them.

Instead, he shifts amongst women as it suits his own ever-changing intellectual and emotional needs. Like Tom Crick, this narrator accomplishes such epistemological flexibility by defining femininity negatively and abstractly: he tends to imagine women as not-rationality, not-intellectualism, rather than as anyone in particular. This approach allows womanhood to encompass a wide range of threats to masculine reason; in *The Newton Letter*, it accommodates both the excessively physical (ungainly, sexually available Otilie) and the insufficiently worldly (wispy, unattainable Charlotte). As Frehner argues compellingly, Otilie thus functions as a metonymy for “ordinariness” in opposition *both* to the scholar adrift from the details of everyday life *and* to the woman this scholar imagines as a tragic heroine (54). Yet these differences prove far less significant to the narrator than do the various female archetypes’ shared threat to scholarship and reason—and so he remains perfectly and perversely able to imagine that seamless combination of Charlotte and Otilie as Charlottilie, and to attribute his unfinished book to her. Obviously problematically, it is neither Charlotte nor Otilie but imaginary Charlottilie who stands in the narrator’s mind for feminine reality’s challenge to historiography.

Despite repeatedly and grandly rejecting history as a mode of knowing inadequate to the reality embodied in these women, however, the narrator does return to an academic post and is far from committed to the abandonment of his Newton biography by the end of his account. Throughout the novel, he repeatedly catches himself at his old ways, slipping into historical rather than autobiographical narrative conventions: “Look at me, writing history,” he notes wryly; “old habits die hard” (6). Perhaps most tellingly, when

faced with the task of recounting the traumatic night during which he finally realizes that Edward is dying and Charlotte drugged, he reverts to his historian-voice for two substantial paragraphs of “evidence” and a footnote before claiming, “I can’t go on. I’m not an historian anymore” (69-70). But far more striking than his gestures of epistemological maturation is the fact that he does go on, narrating and speculating. Alongside his tentative withdrawal from history and his flirtation with the intensities of life outside scholarship, this intellectual continues to bring to bear powers of disciplinary history—analysis and distance—against the irrational world of details he posits as feminine.

By the chronological end of the novella (introduced near the text’s opening), the narrator has fled from this threatening figure of his imagination, but he does so geographically rather than through genuine intellectual growth. *The Newton Letter* distances itself from its narrator’s conceptual framework partly through a structure that underscores his unsatisfactory stasis. Although the narrator repeatedly finds his theories incorrect and adjusts the individual conjectures according to new evidence, he never rethinks his fundamental habit of viewing the world through predetermined theories in the first place. By weaving the story’s end throughout the text, the novel highlights its narrator’s continuing moral and intellectual failures and their relationship to his way of seeing women. We leave him waffling about whether he will return to his Newton biography, struggling to imagine his future because he remains overconfident and irrationally specific about it (certain, for instance, that his and Otilie’s child “will be a boy, it must be” [81]); because he is unwilling to commit to either scholarship or world, in the false and still-rigidly-gendered dichotomy on which he insists; and because,

although at the text's end he acknowledges his "willful blindness" toward Edward (80), he is just as willfully blind at the end of story and text as at the beginning.<sup>57</sup> The end of the story, the narrator's life in the present tense as he receives Otilie's letters and writes his own to Clio, surfaces to be compared with the shameful past from the novella's beginning to its last page, the end of these letters—and although the letter-writer perceives himself as deeply changed, this structure actually underscores his continuing delusion and self-importance.

### **Fictional Historians' Texts and the Role of the Knower in Knowledge**

Through its nonlinear epistolary structure, then, *The Newton Letter* critiques gendered fantasies and echoes the gender history that was gaining force at the time. Both *Waterland* and *The Newton Letter* use their rhetorical stance as fictional historians' texts to invite extra-disciplinary readers into questions about how historians do and ought to

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<sup>57</sup> Critics disagree on this point. McMinn and McIlroy, for instance, believe that the narrator changes substantially and for the better: "Wiser now," McMinn maintains, "the narrator realises that the original separation of thought and experience that led to Newton's breakdown is precisely his own problem" (91). By this reading, the narrator employs this realization in producing the text we read in place of a traditional historical biography; an innovator in his discipline, he has learned the lessons of his experiences during the story. On the other hand, Imhof insists that this historian remains "a victim of willful blindness. He has not learned anything [...]" (151). It seems to me that the narrator's representation of Otilie makes this point quite clearly: by the time he writes the letters that make up this novel, Otilie is writing him her own letters, but he neither reproduces her words for us as he does Newton's and his own, nor seems to pay much attention to them. Instead, he claims, "Less in what she says than in the Lilliputian scrawl itself, aslant from corner to corner of the flimsy blue sheets, do I glimpse something of the real she, her unhandiness and impetuosity, her inviolable innocence" (8). His brief reference to the letter's content is an amused, patronizing one; now pregnant with the narrator's child, "She wants me to lend her the fare to come and visit me!" (8). If the narrator's aim in writing outside disciplinary history is to overcome that "willful blindness" toward the ordinary world around him, as he suspects Newton did in abandoning his scholarship, he fails utterly.

know the past. In the terms of this questioning, they reflect the period of their publication, when modernist historians found their work under attack on multiple and often contradictory grounds—as dependent upon philosophically problematic notions of the subject/object divide, factuality, and realist narrative (on the part of the postmodernist philosophers of history); as too far from Victorian narrative histories with their reassuring progress narratives and accessible style (on the part of conservative critics and proponents of English heritage); and as ignoring women and reinforcing unexamined assumptions regarding gender identity (on the part of the gender historians). Both novels participate in a postmodernist epistemological critique by deconstructing faith in the disembodied mind, the intellectual above the fray of ordinary life, as the basis of historical knowledge and production. Yet, as my readings have suggested, the novels exert distinct degrees of force in unsettling the foundations of mainstream historical knowledge, in part because of their different understandings of gender and their different emotional connections to the past. This chapter concludes with attention to the implications of *Waterland*'s nostalgic critique and especially *The Newton Letter*'s more radical stance toward received forms of knowledge by considering their connections to and differences from historians' scholarly work.

Although this chapter has foregrounded the differences between *Waterland* and *The Newton Letter*, their similarities are also relevant to the concerns of this section, which begins to ask the larger question at the center of the next and final chapter: how are fictional historians' texts' historical-epistemological functions related to those of disciplinary histories? In outlining the diversity of fictional historians' texts while tracing their common ground of unavoidable embeddedness within contemporary anxieties about

historical knowledge and authority, the preceding chapters describe a narrative stance that operates in ways distinct from, but potentially complementary to, factual historical discourse. And indeed, both *The Newton Letter* and *Waterland* use their connection to and distance from disciplinary history to position their readers as historians' readers and guide them through historiographic issues, but from a stance that invokes disciplinary history as a practice without tying itself to disciplinary procedures. The result is that both texts comment upon the production of historical knowledge without the requirement for systematic critique. The freedom this narrative stance creates—to speak as though from a position both within and outside this authoritative discipline—allows the novels to pick up strands of current historiographic work and debates without accepting or rejecting them wholesale, and without sorting them into tidy categories. More specifically, these two novels use storytelling to dramatize the limitations of a mind or a discourse convinced of its own universality and transparency; both thereby imply a reality in which all knowledge is situated, and viable knowledges integrate their own embeddedness into their accounts.

But although neither historian can achieve his initial goal of narrating reality more clearly by avoiding the reality for which women become metonymies, these failures take on fundamentally contradictory meanings in the two novels—contradictory meanings that implicate them differently in a rethinking of gender as a force within historical knowledge. As I have argued here, *Waterland* wavers between longing for and inverting familiar historiographic values, leaving their essentializing visions of femininity in place; *The Newton Letter*, on the other hand, undermines the conceptual system that links women to nature-outside-history, and men to historical reason, in the first place. Far from

performing the work of gender history in historicizing gender roles, *Waterland* serves all too well as an illustration of the reification of women and the removal of women from history that necessitate this project in the first place. *The Newton Letter* illustrates the conditions against which gender history reacts with greater self-consciousness, itself indicating the need for rethinking through its ironic representation of its historian narrator. Despite these differences, however, in both cases—and indeed in all the fictional historians’ texts treated in this study—because the novels connect to disciplinary history primarily through ventriloquizing a practitioner of history, their commentary on historical knowledge places the role of the historical knower front and center.

In *The Newton Letter*, this metahistorical emphasis on the producer and production of historical discourse (rather than on the discourse itself) is further underscored through the figure of Newton. While the proper historical text—the scholarly biography of Newton so nearly completed by the narrator—would presumably offer an account of Newton’s life and work based upon archival research and situated within specialized scholarly debates, the extra-disciplinary form of this novel allows it to employ Newton more evocatively. Here, he appears simultaneously as a historical actor, as a familiar symbol in the popular historical imagination, *and* as a projection of the narrator’s mind. Through a fictional letter from Newton as well as a historical one, *The Newton Letter* depicts this human symbol of scientific rationality as himself already unable to reconcile such rationality with the reality surrounding him: unlike *Waterland*, it avoids an implication that some lost form of knowledge once offered representational adequacy, instead connecting the narrator’s late-twentieth-century historical assumptions with a masculinist arrogance in Enlightenment science. The novel’s use of Newton

facilitates its critique of historical-epistemological confidence by making visible Enlightenment science's influence on modernist historical thought, and by setting not only the historian narrator but his scientist subject against a frightening, essentialized (and totally imaginary) female sexuality.

Despite his abandonment of the Newton biography, the *Newton Letter* narrator continues to obsess about this figure of scientific rationality at its birth in the Enlightenment. As he distinguishes himself and especially his scholarship from the physical and the feminine, the narrator ties himself intimately to the subject of his historical work-in-progress; in an increasingly emphatic parallel to “that mad letter Newton wrote [...] accusing the philosopher out of the blue of [...] having tried to embroil him with women” (5), *The Newton Letter* positions itself as a mad letter accusing humdrum reality of trying to embroil the narrator with women. This mocked opposition between serious scholarship and a feminized world clearly resonates with Smith's history of disciplinary history, according to which an “antimony of body (concerning women and everyday life) to spirit (indicating politics) generally resonated through the language of professionalization” (138). But, as Smith also notes and as *The Newton Letter* dramatizes with such clarity, a gendered construction of objectivity was not an invention of late-nineteenth-century history but rather a borrowing from Enlightenment science. Unlike *Waterland*, where the historical-epistemological difficulties of a violent and disordered twentieth century are opposed to the narrative security of an idealized past, *The Newton Letter* thus works to deconstruct the Enlightenment roots of both Victorian and modernist historiography.

Both *The Newton Letter*'s use of Newton and its attention to the gendering of

knowledge tie it to projects within disciplinary history in the 1980s and later. In 1991, when Scott looked back upon recent decades' developments within the overlapping fields of women's history, feminist history, and gender history she urged historians to consider the implications of these approaches upon disciplinary history as a way of knowing:

The radical threat posed by women's history lies exactly in [its] challenge to established history; women can't just be added on without a fundamental recasting of the terms, standards and assumptions of what has passed for objective, neutral and universal history in the past because that view of history included in its very definition of itself the exclusion of women. (58)

Feminist historians of science had already launched such a project in the 1980s, with publications including Evelyn Fox Keller's *Reflections on Gender and Science* (1985) and Londa Schiebinger's *The Mind Has No Sex?: Women in the Origins of Modern Science* (1989); these works analyze the gendered construction of scientific authority during science's period of disciplinization and professionalization and beyond. But historical scholarship's own foundations remained largely unquestioned by historians who, as Scott reminds us, were largely preoccupied with making room for women within historical narratives and the discipline's institutions (rather than with attacking history's core values).<sup>58</sup> From outside the discipline, however, *The Newton Letter* foreshadows Scott's "radical threat" by tying its historian narrator's knowledge to the anxiously

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<sup>58</sup> The history of science, a subfield firmly established within disciplinary history by the early twentieth century, set to questioning progress narratives and internalist intellectual history much earlier than has the history of historiography; Thomas Kuhn's influential *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*, for instance, appeared in 1962. It is significant that, while the history of science has long enjoyed an institutional presence and recognition as a subfield within the discipline, the history of historiography has yet to develop a comparable legitimacy. Despite a long tradition of historical biographies of individual historians, and increasing production of more broadly researched and theorized monographs on the discipline's own past, the absence of such a field of knowledge and debate continues to restrict our understanding of this epistemologically—and often politically—authoritative way of knowing.



masculine knowledge of Isaac Newton.

Indeed, both *Waterland* and *The Newton Letter* join their feminist contemporaries in the history of science in suggesting that Enlightenment-born ideals of universality, rationality, and objectivity are not at all universal but markedly masculinist. As Keller would argue in 1985:

In sympathy with, and even in response to, the growing division between male and female, public and private, work and home, modern science opted for an ever greater polarization of mind and nature, reason and feeling, objective and subjective; in parallel with the gradual desexualization of women, it offered a deanimated, desanctified, and increasingly mechanized conception of nature. [...] With [Nature] reduced to its mechanical substrate, and [Woman] to her asexual virtue, the essence of *Mater* could be both tamed and conquered; male potency was confirmed. (63-4)

Such polarization is of course evident in both novels, whose narrators assume the conceptual clumps of mind-reason-objectivity-men and nature-feeling-subjectivity-women. Furthermore, both texts undermine the implied universality of these associations by suggesting that this tamed version of Woman/Nature is no longer feasible in their postmodern world. Much as both men long for the certainty of male potency as it might be affirmed by women whose bodies, actions, and symbolic resonance are easily controlled, femininity proves insistently troubling. Tom can never understand, let alone control, Mary; the *Newton Letter* narrator subjects Otilie to his analytic gaze but, as readers perceive all too clearly, has enormous trouble seeing clearly.

Both novels thus use a gendered dichotomy to present the inadequacy of inherited form of historical knowledge to a postmodern perspective—to enact what Brian McIlroy describes in *The Newton Letter* as “the humbling of an intellectual in the face of the natural, arbitrary, tragic, disorganized world” (128). But unlike *Waterland*, *The Newton Letter* suggests not only that reality sometimes takes precedence over historical discourse,

but also that women are probably *not* actually enigmatic anti-historian figures. It hints insistently that Otilie and Charlotte contain more than the narrator's projections of murky particulars and pristine feeling, even if it cannot convey the details of that reality. Readers know perfectly well that the narrator is wrong: far from the aristocratic, calm, dignified spirit-lady he imagines, for instance, Charlotte is a depressed, medically sedated woman struggling with financial problems and Edward's terminal illness. Because the narrator is so clearly unreliable, readers are able to glimpse this 'real' Charlotte behind his illusions—yet she cannot appear as a full character or become fully available to us through his consciousness. Similarly, while we are shown that Otilie is probably not the “semi-animate doll with childlike ways and no name” the narrator first perceives (43), we can only see alternative, equally stereotyped, Otilies as the narrator shifts in his perception or creation of this woman.

What we do see increasingly clearly is the narrator: in his self-absorption, lack of feeling or empathy, and anonymity, he is himself closer to that “semi-animate doll with childlike ways and no name” than Otilie. Women in the novel, not allowed to exist beyond the narrator's intellectual and aesthetic projects, function as modes of his own self-reflection and self-expression. And while this limitation of perspective prevents the text from doing much of the work of women's and gender history—from telling women's stories and from reconceptualizing gendered relationships and roles as historically contingent—it also not only allows but dramatizes a critique of *this precise limitation* and its implications for historical (mis)understanding. Like all fictional historians' texts, *The Newton Letter* is intensely and inherently metahistorical, focusing on the role of the historian rather than on the knowledge produced (and rather than producing historical

knowledge). While this novel does not actually historicize gender, it does suggest the need for such work. And it suggests it to an extra-disciplinary audience in a performative mode that does not require in-depth historical or historiographic knowledge.

These capacities offer a preliminary answer to the question I raised near the beginning of this section: how are fictional historians' texts' historical-epistemological functions related to those of disciplinary histories? These historically-engaged fictions are not just undisciplined, sloppy, or ill-informed histories or philosophies of history. Rather, through imaginative performances of historical discourse and of individual historians' voices, they prompt readers to pay attention to the role of the knower in historical knowledge. As we can see in the marked contrast between *Waterland* and *The Newton Letter*, the narrative stance they share can accommodate a wide range of engagements with the production of historical knowledge; whereas *The Newton Letter* cultivates skeptical readers, *Waterland* actually reinforces unexamined assumptions that, from a feminist perspective, seriously need deconstructing. Not itself a historiographic-epistemological position, then, the fictional historian's text form is a tool that can do the work of a number of positions.

Because their imagined rhetorical situation causes them to foreground and historicize historiographic processes, these texts have the potential to translate scholarly changes and debates about historical knowledge in ways that can mold and persuade non-specialist receivers of history. And although some reviewers and scholars reacted with horror when historian Simon Schama mingled fiction and history (defined by those anxious reviewers as simple opposites) in his 1991 *Dead Certainties*, the next chapter analyzes his interdiscursive employment of fiction in this more specific context of the

fictional historian's text as a technique for shaping and instructing historians' readers. By operating partly in a fictional mode, *Dead Certainties* does limit itself in its ability to construct historical narratives and tell historical truths. But it also thus avails upon the fictional historian's text's potential to engage extra-disciplinary readers in historiographic questions by dramatizing the changing processes of historical knowing.

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## CHAPTER SIX

### Narrowing the Modernist Divide:

#### Professional Historians, Extra-Disciplinary Readers, and *Dead Certainties*

At the 1893 Special Meeting of the Massachusetts Historical Society held in memory of Francis Parkman, the Society's president unveiled a memoir the historian had given him in 1868 to be read after his death. In Simon Schama's 1991 *Dead Certainties (Unwarranted Speculations)*, Parkman's colleagues listen as the president reads out the document, which quickly transforms their eager curiosity into distress by turning their cherished image of Parkman on its head:

it became suddenly, dismayingly apparent that the document *was* indeed saturated, even supersaturated, with egotism, not in the least diminished (in fact reinforced) by Parkman's manner of referring to himself in the third person. Moreover, what they were listening to, with rapidly mounting discomfort, was not history at all but case history. It spoke to them of sickness, torments mental and physical, an unceasing, unsparing war between body and mind [...]. Was this poor tragic figure, crumpled in pain and hysteria, the same man whose prose had encompassed the American landscape and had made the death of Wolfe a great transfiguration? Was this truly Parkman, the historian-as-hero? (44-5)

This memoir is tangential in its relationships to the two historical events that serve as focal points for the two parts of *Dead Certainties*, the 1759 death of General James Wolfe and the 1849 murder of George Parkman—Francis Parkman, who wrote the long-influential account *Montcalm and Wolfe*, happens also to have been George's nephew. Yet however peripheral in terms of the plots, this connection renders Francis Parkman

uniquely central to the text, as the only concrete connection between its two sets of narratives. Furthermore, the historian's memoir not only introduces him as a conflicted but brilliant figure, but also raises the most fundamental issues at stake in *Dead Certainties*: the proper stance of the historian, the possible roles of historians' readers, and the ways in which discursive conventions (and violations of them) tend to hide (and expose) these historically- and personally-situated factors under the guise of universal historical knowledge.

This chapter argues that *Dead Certainties* works to produce more active receivers of history—readers who approach historical discourse as historically embedded—by systematically drawing attention to the role of the historian in historical knowledge. It foregrounds this role on multiple textual levels: through its treatment of Parkman, through the narratives' mixing of historical and fictional discourses, and through Schama's historical and theoretical gestures in the many paratextual elements that accompany these narratives. *Dead Certainties* thus works to cultivate extra-disciplinary readers who understand objectivity as an ideal rather than as an unproblematic reality and see historical knowledge as bound by individual scholars' decisions as well as by the inherent incompleteness of archival records. In this sense, *Dead Certainties* fosters an engaged rather than a passive audience, not only for itself but for the huge number of popular histories, history magazines, historical documentaries, and historical films and fictions so voraciously consumed at the time of its publication.<sup>59</sup>

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<sup>59</sup> This eager consumption of popular historical narratives was shared by Schama's native England and his adopted United States, though it operated with reference to the culturally-specific context of English Heritage in the former; the debates over postmodernism's impact on disciplinary history (important to a later section of this chapter) were even more transnational. Born and educated in England, Schama moved to



This text and its most negative reviewers share a rhetorical strategy that has taken on great significance in the context of this dissertation: they emphasize the position of *Dead Certainties*'s author as a historian. For the text's critics, its diversions from the historical record are particularly disturbing and harmful to historical knowledge because of Schama's status as historian.<sup>60</sup> Yet, whereas some historians publish fiction under pseudonyms,<sup>61</sup> Schama not only publishes under his own name but constantly reminds

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the United States in 1980 and wrote *Dead Certainties* in Cambridge, Massachusetts, rather than the Cambridge of his university years. Yet Schama has continued contributing to the British popular history boom through his work with the BBC, and publishes in the popular presses of both countries. This chapter continues the dissertation's exploration of a British historiographic context without treating it in isolation, as Schama constantly crosses such national lines—both of scholarly community and of historical subject—in his scholarly and his popular work.

<sup>60</sup> Diana Solano, for instance, describes Schama as “a professional historian lured by the prestige of contemporary literary theory” (233). When Gordon Wood writes that *Dead Certainties* “is an extraordinary book, with important implications for the discipline of history, especially because of who Schama is [...] a prominent practicing historian” (rather than a literary scholar, philosopher of history, or novelist) (12), and when A. J. Sherman refers pointedly to Schama as “a well-known historian with a substantial body of historical publication to his credit” before describing the text's inclusion of imagined scenes and voices (90), each draws attention to the responsibilities and expectations associated with Schama's status outside the text. Sherman critiques *Dead Certainties* for a “blithe approach to historical writing, which teeters on the brink of infotainment, lies in that border area perhaps more appropriate to Norman Mailer or Truman Capote, and seems fraught with problems for serious historians”—implying that the same book would be far less problematic if it were written by someone outside the discipline (90). In his review, Wood is able to refer to “the historian's responsibility” (16) as though we all know and agree about what that is—an assumption considerably less likely to be made about a concept such as “the novelist's responsibility.”

<sup>61</sup> Paul Doherty, for instance, long published historical murder mysteries as Vanessa Alexander, Anna Apostolou, Michael Clynes, Ann Dukthas, C. L. Grace, and Paul Harding, though he now uses only his own name. This option probably gained force during nineteenth-century professionalization as historians defined themselves increasingly *against* fiction-writers, even as many of them continued to enjoy and even produce novels: for example, Henry Adams published *Democracy* (1880) anonymously and *Esther* (1884) as Frances Snow Compton. On the other hand, Schama is far from the only historian who has chosen to publish fiction under his professional name; nor is he at

readers to imagine him as a professional scholar of the past. Like John Fowles's *A Maggot*, *Dead Certainties* constructs a historian consciousness through both its peritext (the paratextual elements printed alongside the main text) and the body of the text—and like *A Maggot*, this text and its paratext ask readers to take an active part in historical interpretation rather than relying solely upon a reliable historian narrator. The implied author of *Dead Certainties* does historians' work, writing footnotes, narrative, analysis, and a bibliographic note, and inserting and captioning images: all of these marginal features remind readers to imagine the text's maker as a historian, keeping visible the text's constructions of authority and authorship. In this case, however, the narrator's status as historian extends outside the printed work into Schama's biographical existence and the epitext that informs the text's reception.<sup>62</sup> Through interviews and reviews as well as through the text's narratives and the paratext's acknowledgments, footnotes, afterword, and other components, the author reminds readers that we are reading a historian's text even as their oddities make it quite clear that *Dead Certainties* is not a proper history.

This chapter begins by exploring the text's use of its two main historian figures, Simon Schama and Francis Parkman. Parkman's simultaneously tangential and central position in the text mirrors Schama's own role, as he speaks an anonymous voice in the main narratives but draws attention to his acts of selection, arrangement, interpretation, and imagination through paratextual elements. Through a self-consciously

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all innovative in turning to fiction in an effort to reach a wider audience. It seems that it is the conjunction of Schama's historian status and his performative assault on modernist conventions, not his idea that truths about history might be expressed through fiction, that strikes some of his colleagues as particularly offensive.

<sup>62</sup> As in chapter four, I borrow this terminology from Gérard Genette.

unconventional structure, *Dead Certainties* foregrounds these historians' roles in historical knowledge—in direct contrast with modernist scholarly history's self-construction as a transparent way to represent the past. By emphasizing the role of a historian's choices—shaped by their training, values, interests, experiences, and personalities—in the construction of a historical account, *Dead Certainties* asks its non-specialist audience to become critical receivers of all historical narrative. And as the following section asserts, the text simultaneously emphasizes the value and possible role of this extra-disciplinary audience in a way that makes a point regarding *historians'* practices: that modernist historiography has moved too far from a narrative tradition and has become too insular in its discursive conventions, neglecting both the literary style and the large, public audiences Schama nostalgically remembers in the nineteenth-century historians.

This second section moves outside the text into its epitext, the critical debate that retrospectively affects the text's significance. In the context of modernist historians' anxiety regarding what they perceive as a postmodernist threat to their discipline emerging from literary studies and philosophy, *Dead Certainties* has often been appropriated as a symbol for a larger menace breaking into the profession itself rather than on its own terms. Even in the popular press, the text's most virulent critics treat *Dead Certainties* as a manifesto on historical *practice*—as proposing that scholarly historians ought to eschew the line between fiction and factual history. But as my readings of Parkman's and Schama's roles suggest, the text speaks fundamentally to and about extra-disciplinary readers' interpretive practices. Rather than modeling the crossing of the fact/fiction divide as the best or only possible approach to history, it *uses* that

charged divide in a performance that works to bring extra-disciplinary readers closer to professional historians (by learning more sophisticated interpretive strategies) and to bring professional historians closer to extra-disciplinary readers (by blending modernist and pre-modernist historiographic values).

Although Schama's and my own projects differ in their approach to literary style, this dissertation joins *Dead Certainties* in envisioning a nonstadial and nonteleological history of historical knowledge in which literary texts and techniques can meaningfully intervene. The chapter's—and the dissertation's—final section reflects upon the marginal status of *Dead Certainties* to this study's category *fictional historians' texts*. I conclude by asking what this text can clarify about this label, about the texts analyzed in the preceding chapters, and about the possible relationships between historical and literary authority, between history's and fiction's discourses and truths. Indeed, *Dead Certainties* seems unavoidably to echo the threads of my dissertation as a whole. This common scope relies upon the fundamental shared ground of both projects: their interest in the impact of disciplinary historical discourse upon extra-disciplinary audiences.

### **Dramatizing Mediation: The Roles of Parkman and Schama**

*Dead Certainties* addresses extra-disciplinary readers largely by performing the production of history in a way that constantly foregrounds the historians' role in the construction of a written history. The text frames its historical narratives so deeply within a self-conscious historiographic peritext that their telling becomes more central than the tales themselves. This section asserts that at a structural level—in its peritext as well as in its architectural use of the Parkman figure—*Dead Certainties* insistently makes historians

and their discursive decisions visible, in contrast to the modernist ideal of historical discourse as mere/clear mirror held to the past. Schama's control over the accounts is partly established through the emphatic and extensive peritext, whose elements in the 1992 paperback edition include: the author's name (accompanied, on the front cover, with a reference to his 1989 popular history *Citizens*), praise excerpts from reviews, a list of Schama's other books, a biographical note outlining his credentials, a dedication and epigraph, a table of contents, an acknowledgements page—all before the text begins. After the narratives of shifting representations of Wolfe's death and of John Webster's trial for George Parkman's murder, readers also receive *retrospective* interpretive instructions and modified historiographic conventions in further peritextual elements, including the much-cited afterword and a bibliographic essay. The conventionally peripheral peritext thus soon takes over as central to the text's meaning, just as that apparently incidental figure Francis Parkman proves the vital connective tissue between the two parts of the text.

The peritext of *Dead Certainties* is noteworthy both in its echoes of conventional historiography and in its manipulation of those echoes; its elements suggest the powerful position of the historian by being obviously constructed and thus defamiliarizing. The conventions of scholarly historiography tend to marginalize the historian with regard to his or her own discourse—for instance, by minimizing first-person pronouns and by separating historical procedures and the historian's perspective into a methodological preface and footnotes distinct from the main text. In contrast with this drive to transparency, *Dead Certainties* draws attention to disciplinary conventions and values by almost but not quite framing itself like a product of those conventions and values. By

denaturalizing such conventions as textual performances, these formal near-misses draw attention to the role of the historian who performs them. And in emphasizing the choices of the potentially unreliable individual historian, *Dead Certainties* reminds readers of our own responsibility for deciding what to believe. Thus, as Louis P. Masur observes, “Schama has shifted the burden from himself to his reader. He has demanded an interactive, not a passive reader” (124). The text’s rejection of a familiar conception of historians—as objective recorders of the ultimately accessible historical truth—implies a shift away from an equally familiar conception of non-historians as passive receivers of this unproblematic data.

*Dead Certainties* also performs this shift through the order of its textual and peritextual components, which violate the traditional order of the parts of a historical text. While commentators including Keith Windschuttle and Gertrude Himmelfarb criticize the text for mixing fictional and historical modes, it is Schama’s manipulation of scholarly historians’ *structural* expectations that turns this error of fictionalization into a full-fledged sin: a methodological preface ought to warn readers of any fictionalization or unusual uses of sources before readers encounter them.<sup>63</sup> But only after the main narratives does Schama address his peculiar methodology and mixture of fiction and fact, acknowledging his use of fiction and instructing us as to its meaning:

Though these stories may at times appear to observe the discursive conventions of history, they are in fact historical novellas, since some

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<sup>63</sup> Himmelfarb criticizes Schama for “introduc[ing] entirely fictional characters and scenes into what might appear to be a conventional work of history [...], identifying them as ‘pure inventions’ only in an ‘Afterword’” (14); Windschuttle not only complains that readers belatedly learn that text includes “what Schama admits are composite assemblies from several different documents” but also asserts that “once some of a book of history is discovered to be fabricated, the reader can never be sure that it is not *all* made up” (229-30).

passages [...] are pure inventions, based, however, on what documents suggest. This is not to say, I should emphasise, that I scorn the boundary between fact and fiction. It is merely to imply that even in the most austere scholarly report from the archives, the inventive faculty—selecting, pruning, editing, commenting, interpreting, delivering judgments—is in full play. This is not a naïvely relativist position that insists that the lived past is *nothing* more than an artificially designed text. (Despite the criticism of dug-in positivists, I know of no thoughtful commentator on historical narrative who seriously advances this view.) But it does accept the rather banal axiom that claims for historical knowledge must always be fatally circumscribed by the character and prejudices of its narrator. (322)

Angry critics tend to point to the first sentence of this passage, demonstrating in a shocked tone that fiction and imagination take a part in the preceding historical accounts. But surely any historian reading the text would already have noticed the many passages that call attention to themselves as possibly inaccurate in being probably unknowable—for instance, the detailed description of Governor George Briggs’s sighs, glances, emotions, and thoughts as he muses alone in his office (73-88). Rather, the less-often-quoted sentences *after* the admission of fictionalization seem considerably more important in staking two claims. They explicitly reject ‘naïve relativism’ as a mere straw man rather than an actual historical-epistemological position amongst professional historians. And they make a large assertion about historical work: “that even [...] the most austere scholarly report from the archives” involves “selecting, pruning, editing, commenting, interpreting, delivering judgments.” By referring to the historian as a history’s “narrator,” Schama does not treat histories as fictions; rather, he asks histories’ readers to approach their claims *as narrated claims* rather than as transcribed truths—to pay attention to the “discursive conventions of history” which are, as he shows through the examples of the preceding narratives, quite manipulable.

Through this skeptical afterword's retrospective impact on the meaning of the narratives, *Dead Certainties* asks its primarily extra-disciplinary audience to reconsider our own reading behavior. The bibliographic essay also contributes to this dynamic; by further delineating the narratives' documentary and imaginative impulses, it too prompts us to rethink the interpretive work we performed as we navigated the preceding narratives' blend of factual-seeming accounts, interpretive claims, and passages begging the question 'How does he know that?' Following these historical accounts, the afterword and bibliographic essay prompt readers to feel not only newly conscious of disciplinary conventions but also self-conscious of the ways in which we may simply have trusted the historian of the narratives to tell us the truth. Situated as they are within an assertively unconventional peritext, these narratives are not left to tell stories (whether factual or fictional) about the historical past. Instead, the peritext reframes them as performative examples through which we might become more active and responsible receivers of historical knowledge.

This reframing and refocusing—on the production and reception of history rather than on historical narratives themselves—also help to clarify the strangely central role of Francis Parkman, who holds the text's two parts together in a way one critic dismisses as “only accidental” (Strout 157) and most others overlook entirely. Parkman's appearance dramatizes the role of the historian on another textual level, working with the peritext to render this role visible to extra-disciplinary readers. This historian figure also helps to historicize Schama and his present-day readers through an implied comparison with this earlier historian and his audiences. If Parkman's histories are significantly the products of a nineteenth-century Boston cultural elite and of a man who struggled with physical and



emotional challenges, must not Schama's be similarly tied to a particular perspective? And if the gentlemen so distressed by Parkman's memoir hold a historically-contingent understanding of the historian's proper role and appearance, must not all readers of histories? Parkman's role as the text's connective tissue again indicates the book's focus on the narrativization and analysis of the past, and especially on the possible roles of the historian in those processes, rather than on 'the past itself.'

The text's treatment of Parkman dramatizes the point made outright in the afterword: an astute reader will remember that historians' characters, experiences, and decisions are always present in historical texts, even when historians work to make themselves transparent. It seems to Parkman's shocked colleagues that he has removed all traces of his private self—"this poor tragic figure, crumpled in pain and hysteria" (45)—from his histories. But Schama has these gentlemen recognize the potential falseness of rhetorical gestures of objectivity, bemoaning the memoir's "egotism, not in the least diminished (in fact reinforced) by Parkman's manner of referring to himself in the third person" (44). *Dead Certainties* represents Parkman's suffering as entirely relevant to his historical methodology and style; although "there was little on Francis Parkman's written pages to suggest a man stranded at the border of his sanity," the steps he took to continue writing after losing his vision and ability to use a pencil necessarily affected his approaches to both research and composition. Schama further suggests that Parkman's sufferings allowed him better to understand Wolfe's "perseverance and fortitude; the punishments of his body; the irritability of his mind; the crazy, agitated propulsion of his energies" (64-5). Schama's Parkman is miserable, unstable, and wildly

different in public and private, yet these flaws contribute to the writing others find so brilliant.

Both the biographical Schama and the historian implied author of *Dead Certainties* clearly admire Parkman's historical writings, his "thrilling, beautiful prose" (Schama, "Clio" 33). And yet, Schama takes pains to point out what he sees as the "compulsions and obsessions that run through the entire tragic [Parkman] dynasty," including both Francis and George (Schama, *Dead* 323). Not simply a brilliant historian, Parkman the person is depicted as struggling to maintain a construct, the figure of "Parkman the Historian" (61). This extensive attention to the great historian as a troubled human being, combined with admiration for his work and indeed for the remarkable physical and mental discipline it took for this broken man to produce quantities of beautiful prose, illuminate with greater nuance Schama's "rather banal axiom that claims for historical knowledge must always be fatally circumscribed by the character and prejudices of its narrator" (322)—whether of this nineteenth-century "gentleman scholar, rose grower and anti-feminist" (41) or of Schama himself.

Indeed, not only the figure of Parkman but also this historicization of Parkman's historical work ties together multiple parts of this otherwise diffuse book. In both sets of narratives and in the afterword, *Dead Certainties* situates Parkman and his writings firmly in the context of late-nineteenth-century Boston's intellectual and economic elite. It suggests that his colleagues were in need of the epistemological shake-up posed by his distasteful memoir, pointing to their naïve faith in "the historian-as-hero" and their related confidence that "history if not wholly on their side was at least firmly in their custody" (41). Schama represents this sense of superiority as dangerous: "With the

Brahmin [...] sheltered from the incivilities of modern life, the barbarian hordes—plutocrats, democrats, Jews in West Roxbury, Irish in South Boston, and especially women, loquacious, determined, vexing women—might all be safely relegated to the remote horizons of the next century” (40-1). And despite his posthumous boat-rocking, Francis Parkman and his depression are depicted as part of the fall of this elite. When Schama claims that “The Parkman inheritance—lying at the core of Boston’s own ambiguous *historical* relationship with old England and New England—deeply colours both [the Wolfe and Webster] stories” (323), his emphasis on the word *historical* is appropriate to the text’s entire treatment of the Boston (and especially Cambridge) elite and of the Parkmans as representatives both of that group and of its decline.

In other words, *Dead Certainties* uses the figure of Parkman to historicize scholarly (and specifically historical) authority. In this sense, the larger second part of the book is not tangentially but *directly* related to the first; the point is not merely Francis Parkman’s relationship with the murder victim but rather the larger historical-epistemological context implied by the Webster trial. In considering his own role in the trial and ensuing death sentence, Schama’s Governor Briggs feels betrayed by a Harvard elite he had admired and trusted. These “Brahmin” are distressingly tied up in a sordid crime, in the persons of the accused murderer and Harvard professor Webster and the murdered and wealthy George Parkman; they then react to the crime in a way Briggs finds distasteful, causing him to wonder, “*Had they fallen, the Elect?*” (83). In the trial itself, part of the defense relies on “that institution whose honour and virtue were really on trial [...] Mother Harvard” (234-5)—but the defense proves unsuccessful. Schama’s analysis of nineteenth-century Boston suggests that the trial occurred at the time of, and

was impacted by, a shift in the status of a cultural, economic, and scholarly elite, whose authority was quickly becoming questionable and questioned. This historical view of cultural and scholarly authority works in a two-way relationship with Schama's own presence in the text *as* a cultural and scholarly authority; each makes the other more visible and more significant.

### ***Dead Certainties* and Modernist History**

*Dead Certainties* habitually renders the peripheral central by focusing on the role of the historian in historical knowledge, reminding readers that historical discourse arises out of historically contingent disciplinary and cultural values as well as personal quirks. The text thus acts out historical discourse as embedded in an imperfect world and poses a challenge to a modernist ideal of absolutely distinct “knower and known, observer and observed, subject and object, form and content, and fact [...] and value” (Munslow 189)—for the benefit of its readers *as* readers of history. Yet at the same time, *Dead Certainties* also resonates with a critique Schama voices more explicitly in many of his other writings: a critique of mainstream disciplinary history in the form of a highly professionalized, empiricist, footnote-obsessed, and insular modernism. Critics attack the text for threatening disciplinary history as a whole by abandoning the distinction between fact and fiction and thus joining with an anarchic postmodernism. But this section claims that its real threat lies in Schama's desire to return to aspects of *pre*-modernist historiography. More specifically, just as *Dead Certainties* cultivates questioning lay readers by foregrounding the position of the historian, it also critiques the practices of many professional historians by foregrounding the (potential) role of a popular audience.

More than the other texts discussed in this dissertation, *Dead Certainties* intervenes clearly and explicitly in the historiographic debates of its time: Schama not only performs a particular historiographic position through the narratives but also directly analyzes it in the following peritextual elements. Furthermore, by virtue of his dual position as a university historian and popular television presenter, as well as his ongoing contributions to arguments about historical knowledge in the popular press, *anything* Schama writes is necessarily thrown into a context of historiographic debates—about the public role of the historian, about the commodification of scholarship, and about the relationship between television-worthy narratives and archival evidence. Though *Dead Certainties* avoids the contentious (and often vaguely-employed) term “postmodernism,” its claims position the text with reference to modernist historians’ anxieties regarding just this perceived threat to their discipline. When the afterword distinguishes amongst its own stance, “a naïvely relativist position,” and “dug-in positivis[m]” (322), it clearly engages the debate raging over postmodernism and its possible effects on disciplinary history.

Historians including Himmelfarb, Windschuttle, Linda Colley, A. J. Sherman, Lawrence Stone, and Gordon Wood have associated *Dead Certainties* with literary and/or historical postmodernism, often as an example of a troublesome postmodernist blurring of the line between fact and fiction. For Himmelfarb, postmodernism in literature involves “a denial of the fixity of any ‘text,’ of the authority of the author over the interpreter, of any ‘canon’ that ‘privileges’ great books over comic books,” while in history it involves “a denial of the fixity of the past, of the reality of the past apart from what the historian chooses to make of it, and thus of any objective truth about the past”

(14). In chapters one and four, I outline a significantly different understanding of postmodernism within historical studies, but the most vigorous critics of *Dead Certainties* characterize it as postmodernist in terms more resonant with Himmelfarb's than with my own definition.<sup>64</sup> It is from this perspective that the fictionalized passages of *Dead Certainties*, often read as just such a rejection "of the reality of the past apart from what the historian chooses to make of it," have incensed commentators.

These responses tend to posit *Dead Certainties* as variously a symptom, portent, or symbol of a postmodernism that threatens to destroy the moral and scholarly discipline of historians. Wood sees the text as a harbinger of disciplinary disaster, turning a wary eye toward my own discipline: "Although historians have scarcely begun to experience the kinds of epistemological quarrels that have torn apart the literary disciplines over the past decade or so, the signs of change are ominous. And Simon Schama's new book [...] is the most portentous of them" (12).<sup>65</sup> Sherman extends even further this tendency to view *Dead Certainties* as representative of a larger problem, by positing it as a *model* for future scholarship:

Schama's blending of fact and fiction, his toying with real events to produce what is in his view a more readable, dare one say marketable, product, paves the way for others to play at the same speculative game.

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<sup>64</sup> Yet as the previous section suggests, if *Dead Certainties* is a postmodernist text as Windschuttle, Himmelfarb, and its other most vehement critics assume, it stands as a challenge to those modernist historians' view of postmodernism as dehistoricizing. Instead, its drive to historicize historical knowledge supports Linda Hutcheon's assertion that postmodernism "asks us to recall that history and fiction are themselves historical terms and that their definitions and interrelations are historically determined and vary with time" (105).

<sup>65</sup> Wood further suggests that Schama has been led down this dangerous path in part by his admitted reading of novels, including an admiration of Jeanette Winterson, Julian Barnes, and Penelope Lively; both literary criticism and literature itself threaten proper history in their postmodernist manifestations.

But in the hands of those not willing to do the hard archival slog, those incapable of reading and interpreting, say, eighteenth- and nineteenth-century letters and journals, what is to prevent the substantial manipulation of evidence, its refashioning to fit some preexisting thesis, or perhaps its mere exaggeration for the sake of drama? (90)

Yet, setting aside the issue of whether *any* methodology could promise useful results in lazy and incompetent hands, the previous section suggests that *Dead Certainties* acts as warning to readers more than as model for historians. This distinction also problematizes Stone's already-conflicted assertion that "Schama's book reveals the perilous chasm looming directly ahead of us" (192) *and* that postmodernism is quite ineffectual in its attack, "since nearly everyone, except perhaps Schama, seems to be retreating from this position" (193). Moves such as Sherman's and Stone's suggest that *Dead Certainties*—and even postmodernism in general—function more as straw men than as genuine threats in their arguments.

As Himmelfarb points out, much postmodernist insight with regard to historical knowledge is far from news to historians. She claims:

Historians, ancient and modern, have always known what postmodernism professes to have just discovered—that any work of history is vulnerable on three counts: the fallibility and deficiency of the historical record on which it is based; the fallibility and selectivity inherent in the writing of history; and the fallibility and subjectivity of the historian. As long as historians have reflected upon their craft, they have known that the past cannot be recuperated in its totality, if only because the remains of the past are incomplete and are themselves part of the present, so that the past itself is, in this sense, irredeemably present.

Historians including Himmelfarb herself characterize *Dead Certainties* as an attack upon the heart of disciplinary history in insisting that historical knowledge is situated and partial even when the historian strives conscientiously for objectivity and truth. But for most historians (again, including Himmelfarb herself), these insights are so obvious as to

be trite. Disciplinary history has long operated in terms of scholarly disagreement, competing theories, careful awareness of historians' own preoccupations, and the simple but significant limitations imposed through the availability of archival materials, financial limits on travel, time constraints on research and writing, and publication opportunities influenced by market forces and institutional priorities. This strange double motion—postmodernism as new menace, postmodernism as old news—suggests that perhaps extra-disciplinary audiences are more to the point than are disciplinary procedures, in the most negative criticisms of the text as in *Dead Certainties* itself. After all, familiar traditions of school history and popular history *do* present historical knowledge as unquestionable, factual truth and historians' authority on the past as absolute: as Amy J. Elias reminds us, although a linear, one-event-after-another timeline “enormously oversimplifies what historians do, [...] it does not oversimplify how history is taught. Ordinary people in the West tend to learn history this way: as a series of interlocking, singular events along a time line that form a pattern and meaningful past” (137-8). Even the vast majority of the college-educated minority never experiences history as it is taught in graduate seminars and practiced by professional historians, learning it instead as transparent content and narrative. Yet the selection of a research topic and questions, the very forces that bring scholars to a particular text, interviewee, or archive (not to mention research method) in the first place, are based on both personal and disciplinary values. Admitting that, as most mainstream historians do, allows conscientious attention to the role of the historian's and the discipline's historically-situated values in determining what counts as legitimate history. But it also undermines an unquestioning belief in the authority of the historian as the objective, wise holder of a mirror to the past.



Thus, *Dead Certainties* does suggest a critique of modernist historical values and practices, though not the critique these modernists decry—a critique that would tear down any distinction between fact and fiction and discard all historical procedures willy-nilly. Instead, this text suggests a challenge both less radical and more threatening than such an imagined postmodernist upheaval: a critique of the absolute separation between professional historians as masters of knowledge, on one hand, and extra-disciplinary consumers of that historical knowledge, on the other. Far from a wholesale dismissal of historical knowledge, *Dead Certainties* more modestly encourages readers to entertain the idea that a given history may not be as transparent, authoritative, and unmotivated as we had always assumed. By breaking the promises of historical discourse, it foregrounds the troublesome assumptions we may be tempted to make—that history and fiction are easy to tell apart; that history (singular) is the truth (also singular); that historians are objective heroes of knowledge rather than individuals with character flaws and hardships, as well as self-interested members of a certain class in a certain time and place; that the written works of historians are transparent representations of historical truth rather than followers of a set of historically-determined conventions. The historians who say ‘we don’t need this warning’ may simply be misunderstanding the non-specialist audience of Schama’s text, thinking too much through their own particular positions. The historians (sometimes the same ones) who say that such texts undermine the authority of historical discipline may simply prefer their readers to believe in their ability to provide objective and universal historical knowledge, even if the historians themselves know that such faith is misguided.

In opposition to such an epistemological divide between authoritative historian and passive audience, Schama pushes professional historians and general audiences closer together in two ways: by prompting general audiences to perform as more sophisticated receivers, and by proposing a shift back to an earlier form of historical narrative. In *Dead Certainties* and elsewhere, Schama refers to history's past in ways that historicize and critique the discipline's current mainstream practices. Indeed, in many passages an epistemologically nostalgic Schama sounds strikingly like his conservative critic Windschuttle—except that the latter cites earlier historians to bolster rather than to destabilize late-twentieth-century modernism. For Windschuttle:

The best reasons for studying the works of the historical canon are those given by John Clive: the great writers show us how history can be a literature that attains the highest form of art. Reading their works provides not only lessons in the form and structure of writing and research but inspiration to ignite the ardour of both readers and writers. Moreover, in showing us what we stand to lose if this endangered discipline is hunted to extinction, the great works [canonical histories] give us not only the grounds to truly value history but the determination needed to hold off all the theoretical and literary interlopers who are now so hungrily stalking in the corridors. (249)

As examples of “great writers,” Windschuttle cites Edward Gibbon, Thomas Babington Macaulay, Thomas Carlyle, Frederic William Maitland, and Alexis de Tocqueville—a list not unlike Schama's in an article published the same year as and highly consonant with the values of *Dead Certainties*. In this article, Schama endorses an essentially late-Victorian historical approach through a brief history of history's disciplinization, in which he distinguishes between the “storytellers” and the “scientists”; on the side of the “storytellers,” Schama cites Jules Michelet, Thomas Carlyle, Thomas Babington Macaulay, George Bancroft, William Hickling Prescott, and Francis Parkman himself; as

“scientists,” Karl Marx, John Seeley, and William Stubbs (“Clio” 22).<sup>66</sup> Like Windschuttle, Schama strikes an elegiac note in describing the canonical narrative historians: “The thrilling, beautiful prose of the Bostonians—Bancroft, Prescott and Parkman—began to gather dust and line the shelves of antiquarian bookstores, where they may still be dependably found, neglected giants slumbering within their dark green casings of cloth and morocco.” Schama and Windschuttle even share an admiration of John Clive, to whose memory *Dead Certainties* is dedicated. But if both these historians aim to redirect their colleagues’ attention to classic models of narrative historiography, why does Windschuttle not only slam Schama as the mortal enemy of historical discipline but also completely ignore this overlap of interest?

Beyond the obvious rhetorical convenience of portraying Schama and *Dead Certainties* as the unambiguous representatives of those postmodernist “theoretical and literary interlopers,” another cause of this total differentiation lies in the very different schemas through which Windschuttle and Schama seem to imagine the history of disciplinary history. *Dead Certainties* supports Schama’s more straightforward (analytic rather than performative) accounts by enacting a layered and nonlinear understanding of historical knowledge; it thus promotes a historicized vision of the profession by which he

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<sup>66</sup> Schama recounts history’s professionalization thus:

in the third quarter of the [nineteenth] century, as history became an academic discipline, the free companionship between literature and history was deemed by newly founded university departments to be fundamentally unserious. The storytellers were shoved aside by scientists intent on reconstructing from fragments and clues what they insisted would be an empirically verifiable, objectively grounded version of an event, its causes and consequences precisely delineated. [...] The power to make a reader live within such vanished moments, to feel for a while the past to be more real, more urgent than the present, was henceforth left to the historical novelists, while the “professionals” got on with “serious work,” the production of a Definitive Explanation for Important Events. (“Clio” 32-3)

himself—like Parkman—is necessarily situated within a particularly disciplinary and cultural context. To this account, Windschuttle implicitly opposes a teleological understanding by which historical discipline has reached a pinnacle of scientific objectivity and must not be abandoned or trifled with. Schama's effort to extend historians' voices outside the discipline and to dramatize historiographic debates for an extra-disciplinary audience—his effort to overcome what he sees as modernist history's distance from extradisciplinary audiences—takes place through a combination of postmodernist formal innovation and deep formal nostalgia. And this combination simply does not make sense in terms of a modernist account of historical knowledge and its history.

Schama hopes to harness the late-twentieth-century expansion of popular history's audience by returning, however self-consciously and partially, to the Victorian narrative tradition in which historians like Macaulay reached incredibly large audiences—but instead of launching an argument against such inviting narrative history in the popular press at the risk of appearing elitist, many of the text's critics attack *Dead Certainties* by lumping it together with highly-theorized postmodernist philosophies of history and postmodernist fictions so often dismissed as inaccessible. Yet Schama also does not simply support a return to a pre-modernist historical approach, let alone affirm the status quo by which extra-disciplinary audiences are offered essentially Victorian histories (usually by extra-disciplinary writers) while disciplinary historians publish modernist histories for each other. Instead, *Dead Certainties* includes not only admiration for and emulation of nineteenth-century historical style but also typically postmodernist techniques of formal defamiliarization, rupture in place of continuity, and the questioning

of universal rather than situated truths—all of which ask readers to enjoy but actively question the book’s engaging narratives.

Both explicitly and implicitly, Schama reaches back toward an expansive and elegant style while disapproving of the elitism, racism, and sexism of its masters. Even as *Dead Certainties* critiques nineteenth-century historical culture as snobbish and restrictive, it also participates in Schama’s project of returning to particular aspects of nineteenth-century British and American historical discourse. It also illustrates a larger trend within late-twentieth-century British historiography to reach back to a Victorian narrative tradition that valued and attracted audiences far beyond professionals in the discipline. While *Dead Certainties* views Francis Parkman critically, for instance, its description of his historical writing—his “prodigious craft; his gift of painting in paragraphs, of recreating the identities of La Salle and Champlain, Montcalm and Wolfe, of tracking their destinies through the forests and river valleys of pristine North America, of giving meaning to their lives and deaths” (43)—is lushly admiring.

Yet despite this evident appreciation and nostalgia, Schama is careful not to recommend a naïve return to the powerful historical approach against which modernism established itself during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries—just as he is careful not to recommend “a naïvely relativist position” in *Dead Certainties*’ afterword (322). He proposes instead a composite form:

To emulate, of course, is not to imitate. We shall never write again in their manner and with their rhetorical confidence, nor should we try. The present generation of historians must find its own voice, just as every generation has before it. The narrative tradition is by no means extinct. In work of unimpeachably “professional” historians and scholars—Bernard Bailyn, Jonathan Spence, Eric Foner, James McPherson, William Cronon, Peter Gay—it remains brilliantly vivid. (“Clio” 33)

Schama not only proposes a happy combination of “professional” (modernist) standards and procedures with a nineteenth-century “narrative tradition” as a theoretical possibility, but also describes that combination as an already-lived reality. He thus suggests a nonlinear and layered history of historical knowledge. Through its use of the nineteenth-century “gentleman scholar” Parkman alongside the twentieth-century university historian and televident Schama, *Dead Certainties* hints at a similar vision of modernist historical thought coexisting with historical narrative on a grander scale, and at a similar hope that the nineteenth-century tradition may come into its own again even within professional historiography. Here, too, Schama’s endorsement is limited. For instance, in a passage that clearly invites readers to compare the operations of *Dead Certainties* and of *Montcalm and Wolfe*, our narrator both admires and bemoans Parkman’s blurring of the line between factual history and historical fiction. In Parkman’s work, Schama writes, “there were brilliantly fabricated moments, flights of pure fanciful embroidery, stitched into the epic. But when he and others could stand back and look at the thing, unfolding before them, the marvel of it all was unmistakable” (63). This moment of tension not only depicts total return to this earlier tradition as undesirable but also further undermines critics’ assumption that *Dead Certainties* posits its own fictionalizing as a *model* for future histories.

When Schama lists the contemporary scholars he does consider sound models for historical writing—Bailyn, Spence, Foner, McPherson, Cronon, Gay—the result does suggest relativism regarding the distinction between fact and fiction. Rather, by focusing on historians who write for both popular and scholarly audiences, Schama implies that the storytellers’ narrative tradition stands not only for a prose style that has since gone

underground, but also for a lost closeness between historians' discourse and a broad popular audience. Schama's critics tend to substitute a specific form of historical authority and discourse (scientific, modernist, proper history) for all the traditions and possibilities of scholarly historical knowledge, assuming rather than arguing that any departure from modernist history's characteristic discursive conventions, its emphasis on specialization, and its valuation of a professional rather than non-specialist audience must represent a departure from meaningful, non-fictional historical knowledge *in toto*. But for Schama, a viable alternative already exists in the works of the fully-credentialed late-twentieth-century scholars he lists so approvingly.

Schama, in and outside of *Dead Certainties*, presents these issues of style ("the storytellers" vs. "the scientists") and of audience as directly related—a connection he often indicates through a tidy peritextual shorthand, in commentary on and (mis)uses of the footnote. This typically modernist peritextual convention was the topic of a lively exchange which, though it considerably postdates *Dead Certainties*, serves efficiently to clarify and contextualize the earlier text's unconventional treatment of the footnote as a symbolically-loaded form.<sup>67</sup> To Jonathan Thompson's colorfully-titled article "History Just Isn't What It Used to Be: Schama Slams Academic Historians," Schama responds:

I most certainly did not "slam" academic historians in the interview I gave

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<sup>67</sup> Historians footnoted long before nineteenth- and twentieth-century professionalization; Gibbon used the form with particular zest. But footnotes as mainstream scholarly historians use them today did emerge along with seminars and professional institutions. In his history of the footnote, Anthony Grafton describes such a note's functions thus: "It identifies both the primary evidence that guarantees the story's novelty in substance and the secondary works that do not undermine its novelty in form and thesis. By doing so, [...] it identifies the work of history in question as the creation of a professional" (5). In other words, while eighteenth-century footnotes could pursue literary and stylistic flights alongside the main narrative, by Schama's time they had become marks of scholarly procedures and requirements for professional advancement.

[...]. In fact, when egged on to say something of this sort, I was at pains to say what I believe, namely that we are now in something of a golden age of narrative writing and that more history which combines scholarship of the highest level with narrative craft is being written than ever before. [...] Nor (since a leader in your paper took me to task on this) did I say anything, or indeed have anything, against footnotes; and in the same interview I went out of my way to sing the praises of Gibbon's footnotes, which are things of stunning erudition, elegance and mischievous wit. ("History" 27)

Rather than critiquing footnoting across the board, Schama makes fun of the modernist spirit of footnote-*obsession*.<sup>68</sup> The two footnotes of *Dead Certainties* are absurdly, assertively random: one offers biographic information regarding the Boston mayor who provided for a "Smokers Circle" mentioned completely in passing in the text (79), while the other discusses the grandson of Parkman's brother-in-law, who is himself an incidental figure in the narrative (110). Both are so oddly placed and irrelevant to the historical accounts that they overtly mock the form. In their small way, these sparse and ironic footnotes partake of Schama's distaste for his discipline's increasing specialization and isolation, in which climate, he quips, "More and more is known about less and less. Articles like 'Labor Relations in the Dutch Margarine Industry 1870-1934' (*History Workshop Journal*, 1990) have no difficulty in finding a publisher" ("Clio" 30). They join in his call for an alternative mode of scholarly writing that would extend historians' knowledge and attention to an audience beyond their discipline, in opposition to the

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<sup>68</sup> Derek S. Linton is certainly correct in writing that not all worthwhile historical research lends itself to narrative, that footnotes are not "simply hollow rituals calculated to constrain Schama's fertile imagination" but rather "enable the reader to judge the fairness, accuracy and reliability of the author," and that "Without lots of minute research, the grand syntheses that Schama cherishes would be impossible" (14). While Schama does often dispense with footnotes in writing for a popular audience and tends to mock just such important archival groundwork, though, he does not actually represent footnotes as so universally offensive as Linton suggests in his response to Schama's *New York Times Magazine* piece "Clio Has a Problem."



insular conversations that occur in scholarly footnotes desperately attempting to differentiate their author's account from those of previous specialists.

*Dead Certainties* performs self-consciously at the edge of disciplinary conventions in order to question the wide gap between mainstream scholarly historians and extra-disciplinary receivers of historical narrative. It functions as a historian's text rather than as a proper history, not because Schama cannot distinguish between researched historical account and imaginative story but because he objects to the contemporary assumption that "proper history" can only include a very specific mode of empiricist, scientific, modernist history. And in yet another echo between textual levels, we find a historian's text inside this historian's text: just as Parkman's position in the text serves to foreground and denaturalize Schama's, his memoir mirrors the text as a whole. Both Parkman and Schama produce alternative accounts that do not fit into the expectations of historian readers, and (as Schama surely anticipated even in writing the text) both appall those colleagues with their deviations. This comparison suggests yet again that *Dead Certainties* positions itself far more as a warning to naïve readers than as a model for historical writing: it is Parkman's history *Montcalm and Wolfe*, not this painfully personal and self-indulgent historian's text, that Schama praises here and elsewhere. But, like *Dead Certainties*, the memoir remains important in another way. The very existence of this other discourse—and the inability of Parkman's historian colleagues to accept it—perform for readers the necessary interactions between a human historian and a historical text, no matter how glossy and self-contained the latter may appear in print.

## Concluding Remarks on (Fictional) Historians' Texts

In the preceding chapters, I employ the term *fictional historian's text* without addressing a point of ambiguity which *Dead Certainties* helps to make visible: in short, does *fictional* modify *historian* or *text*? Each of the novels I have discussed so far—*Orlando*, *I, Claudius*, *Claudius the God*, *A Maggot*, *The Newton Letter*, and *Waterland*—is narrated by a fictional or clearly fictionalized historian *and* operates (at least primarily) in a fictional mode. But this chapter focuses on a text that complicates matters on both scores: the author of *Dead Certainties* is in fact a historian and does not distance himself from the text's discourse through a fictional narrator, and the degree to which the text operates in a fictional as opposed to a factual mode is a point of critical contention.<sup>69</sup> Although it clearly contains fictional scenes, *Dead Certainties* is no more a proper novel than it is a proper history. Judging from both the body of the text and the peri- and epitextual elements that guide our reading of it, the interpretations and arguments put forth in this book are to be taken as Schama's—such that, by Genette's distinction between factual and fictional discourse, the book takes a largely factual stance. In other words, readers are given no signals to imagine that this historian narrator is anyone other than a textualized version of the historian author himself.<sup>70</sup> Unlike the novels explored in

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<sup>69</sup> Martha Tuck Rozett asks, "who decides where the dividing line lies between history and fiction? [...] Consider [...] the case of *Dead Certainties* (*Unwarranted Speculations*), a fascinating pair of linked historical novellas by the well-known cultural historian Simon Schama, whose scholarship has hitherto fallen squarely in the category of non-fiction. *Dead Certainties* was given a Library of Congress "F" classification for history rather than a "PS" for American fiction, despite the fact that Schama calls his text 'a work of imagination, not scholarship'" (25). See also Cushing Strout and Diana Solano.

<sup>70</sup> I obviously exclude those first-person accounts that are clearly distinct from the rest of the narration and whose narrator is a fictional witness—a soldier serving under Wolfe—rather than a fictional historian.

the previous four chapters, *Dead Certainties* is always-already embedded in a historiographic context, by virtue of this historian author—a figure and function emphasized, as we have seen, by being mirrored on various levels of the text.

Yet even if—or rather because—neither historian nor text proves fictional in any straightforward way, *Dead Certainties* illuminates another feature of fictional historians' texts: that they pose as *historians' texts* rather than as proper *histories*. In each of the novels I have so far discussed, a historian consciousness speaks through an unorthodox discursive form. It is by speaking historians' voices but at various angles to their discipline—by operating as alternative texts that take the place of or supplement disciplinary histories—that *all* of these texts create spaces in which creative historiographic engagements can cross the powerful lines dividing disciplinary and extra-disciplinary speakers, audiences, and concerns. *Dead Certainties* occupies a position between the discourses of fiction and of professional history, placing itself in a liminal space whose very existence poses questions for fiction, history, and the line between them. At the same time as it undertakes this project, the text operates under the shadow of its historian author; as we have seen, many reviewers are appalled at its diversions from the historical record explicitly because of Schama's status as historian. As such, this historian's text is peculiarly well-placed as a window through which we can revisit fictional historians' texts' technique of asking historiographic questions through a historian narrator. Schama's use of a (possibly fictional, possibly factual, certainly unconventional) historian's text to question the distance between historians and readers underscores the form's implications in terms of how historical authority does, can, and

should operate in extra-disciplinary arenas, and in terms of the actual and possible relationships between literary fictions and historical-epistemological critique.

Like *Dead Certainties*, this dissertation has explored an intersection of fictional and historical ways of knowing and has found those ways of knowing to be both situated within and limited by discursive conventions—a condition rendered more visible during but by no means limited to the particularly contentious periods I have addressed. But in both *Dead Certainties* and this study, it turns out that such conventions also enable productive self-reflection within and dynamic connections between established ways of knowing. Schama—and, for that matter, Woolf, Graves, Fowles, Banville, and Swift—critique particular ways of knowing and telling history through textual performances whose mixing of discourses denaturalizes but does not disregard the scholarly and aesthetic value of their conventions. By foregrounding the dual function of scholarly discourses as they simultaneously convey knowledge and construct their own authority, these historians' texts engage debates within and about disciplinary history in challenging but never dismissive ways.

In other words, despite concerns such as Himmelfarb's that fictions presuming to comment upon history are bound to posit history as simply a form of fiction, fictional historians' texts more often underscore and historicize the precise discursive differences between history and fiction. These texts do often criticize the conventions and values of particular traditions within disciplinary history—*The Newton Letter*'s performance of modernist objectivity as tied to a limiting and distorting sexism, for instance—and prove perfectly capable of misrepresenting those traditions to a popular audience—most notably in Graves's strange appropriation of Rankean modernism. Yet they are not characterized

by a wholesale dismissal of disciplinary history's procedures and authority, let alone of historical knowledge as a whole. Instead, in their different ways, each prompts extra-disciplinary audiences to engage history as a particular, powerful, and meaningful way of knowing both the past and ourselves.

On the other hand, my dissertation is not merely an elaboration of the theoretical and practical stance of *Dead Certainties*. Instead, the preceding chapters chart a relationship between fiction and history in which not only history but also fiction operates as a legitimate and historically-situated way of knowing, which like history is both bound and freed by its own elaborate and variable discursive conventions. Whereas the anxious critics discussed in this chapter tend reproachfully to group *Dead Certainties* with postmodernist forms such as historiographic metafiction, Schama's references to literary merit actually support Hayden White's 1966 complaint: "when many contemporary historians speak of the 'art' of history, they seem to have in mind a conception of art that would admit little more than the nineteenth-century novel as a paradigm" (42). In other words, it seems to me that Schama imagines a return not just to literary value but to a particular kind of literary value that he fails to historicize—even as he prompts readers to view *historiographic* values as variable and situated.

This reluctance or inability to historicize not only historical but also literary discourse facilitates Schama's epistemological-aesthetic nostalgia. Beyond preventing a nuanced understanding of the relationship between literary and historical values, this one-sided use of discourse mixing also distinguishes Schama's historiographic-epistemological critique from the far more politically- and ethically-engaged one I traced through Woolf's works. It allows Schama to regret *in passing* the great nineteenth-

century narrative historians' distaste for and blindness to "plutocrats, democrats, Jews in West Roxbury, Irish in South Boston, and especially women, loquacious, determined, vexing women" (41). In this sense, his historians' text separates literary style and authority from inconvenient historical contingencies such as elitism, racism, and sexism.<sup>71</sup> Here we see a marked contrast with the exchange between history and fiction as Woolf presents it. Perhaps because of the intimate proximity of late-Victorian historiography to her life and work, and perhaps because of her position as a woman concretely affected by that approach's continuing authority, but also certainly because of her lifelong engagement with problems of literary style as well as those of historical discourse, Woolf is far more concerned with Victorian narrative traditions' habits of exclusion. What Schama presents as unfortunate but avoidable byproducts of the interaction between flawed men and a fundamentally sound set of literary and historical conventions, Woolf views as central products of the realist novel and of Victorian historiography and biography. In carefully situating literary conventions, historiographic conventions, and their interactions, I have attempted to follow Woolf rather than Schama—despite what might reasonably be read as a cautionary tale, the fact that Woolf's care left her permanently unable to settle on a satisfactory way to approach or abandon the historical past.

All of these texts narrate historians' voices beyond the boundaries of their discipline. As we have seen, this shared narrative stance prompts each—carefully or carelessly, deliberately or reluctantly—to engage its period's divisive debates over the

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<sup>71</sup> Similarly, Schama sometimes urges a return to the style of the Victorian historians with the minor adjustment of setting aside their view of English history as victor's Grand Narrative. See for instance the preface to the first volume of Schama's *History of Britain* (especially 14-17) and his "Clio Has a Problem."

proper audience of disciplinary history, and over the proper relationship between historical discourse and storytelling. But by using the liberties of fiction and by speaking at an angle to disciplinary history, fictional historians' texts need not launch coherent arguments or answer all the questions they raise. Rather, like Woolf across her career, each of these texts is able to think seriously about history and ask its readers to do the same, even if it remains self-consciously unable to resolve the daunting historical-epistemological problems of its time. By dramatizing these debates for an extra-disciplinary audience, historians' texts propose an enticing ideal. In their different ways, they strive to fulfill the most compelling promise of *Dead Certainties*—the cultivation of sophisticated and responsible receivers to process the historical narratives flying at us out of books, magazines, radios, and now televisions and movie screens as well as from behind professors' desks—while critically engaging the nuances and embeddedness of *all* the discourses that allow them to perform their worlds.

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