Linda Hutcheon, A Poetics of Postmodernism.
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7

HISTORIOGRAPHIC METAFICTION: "THE PASTIME OF PAST TIME"

I

We theoreticians have to know the laws of the peripheral in art.
The peripheral is, in fact, the non-esthetic set.
It is connected with art, but the connection is not causal.
But to stay alive, art must have new raw materials. Infusions of the peripheral.
Viktor Shklovsky

In the nineteenth century, at least before the rise of Ranke's "scientific history," literature and history were considered branches of the same tree of learning, a tree which sought to "interpret experience, for the purpose of guiding and elevating man" (Nye 1966, 123). Then came the separation that resulted in the distinct disciplines of literary and historical studies today, despite the fact that the realist novel and Rankean historicism shared many similar beliefs about the possibility of writing factually about observable reality (H. White 1976, 25). However, it is this very separation of the literary and the historical that is now being challenged in postmodern theory and art, and recent critical readings of both history and fiction have focused more on what the two modes of writing share than on how they differ. They have both been seen to derive their force more from verisimilitude than from any objective truth; they are both identified as linguistic constructs, highly conventionalized in their narrative forms, and not at all transparent either in terms of language or structure; and they appear to be equally intertextual, deploying the texts of the past within their own complex textuality. But these are also the implied teachings of historiographic metafiction. Like those recent theories of both history and fiction, this kind of novel 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 (see Seamon 1983, 212–16).

In the last century, as Barbara Foley has shown, historical writing and

Scott was an overt one, as was Dickens's to Carlyle in *A Tale of Two Cities* (Foley 1986a, 170–1). Today, the new skepticism or suspicion about the writing of history found in the work of Hayden White and Dominick LaCapra is mirrored in the internalized challenges to historiography in novels like *Shame*, *The Public Burning*, or *A Maggot*: they share the same questioning stance towards their common use of conventions of narrative, of reference, of the inscribing of subjectivity, of their identity as textuality, and even of their implication in ideology. In both fiction and history writing today, our confidence in empiricist and positivist epistemologies has been shaken – shaken, but perhaps not yet destroyed. And this is what accounts for the skepticism rather than any real denunciation; it also accounts for the defining paradoxes of postmodern discourses. I have been arguing that postmodernism is a contradictory cultural enterprise, one that is heavily implicated in that which it seeks to contest. It uses and abuses the very structures and values it takes to task. Historiographic metafiction, for example, keeps distinct its formal auto-representation and its historical context, and in so doing problematizes the very possibility of historical knowledge, because there is no reconciliation, no dialectic here – just unresolved contradiction, as we have just seen in the last chapter.

The history of the discussion of the relation of art to historiography is therefore relevant to any poetics of postmodernism, for the separation is a traditional one. To Aristotle (1982, 1,451a–b), the historian could speak only of what has happened, of the particulars of the past; the poet, on the other hand, spoke of what could or might happen and so could deal more with universals. Freed of the linear succession of history writing, the poet's plot could have different unities. This was not to say that historical events and personages could not appear in tragedy: "nothing prevents some of the things that have actually happened from being of the sort that might probably or possibly happen" (1,451b). History-writing was seen to have no such conventional restraints of probability or possiblity. Nevertheless, many historians since have used the techniques of fictional representation to create imaginative versions of their historical, real worlds (see Holloway 1953; G. Levine 1968; Braudy 1970; Henderson 1974). The postmodern novel has done the same, and the reverse. It is part of the postmodernist stand to confront the paradoxes of fictive/historical representation, the particular/the general, and the present/the past. And this confrontation is itself contradictory, for it refuses to recuperate or dissolve either side of the dichotomy, yet it is more than willing to exploit both.

History and fiction have always been notoriously porous genres, of course. At various times both have included in their elastic boundaries such forms as the travel tale and various versions of what we now call sociology (Veyne 1971, 30). It is not surprising that there would be overlappings of concern and even mutual influences between the two genres. In the eighteenth century the focus of this commonality of concern tended to be the relation of ethics (not factuality) to truth in narrative. (Only with the passing

of the Acts of Parliament that defined libel did the notion of historical "fact" enter this debate – L. J. Davis 1983.) It is not accidental that, "From the start the writers of novels seemed determined to pretend that their work is not *made*, but that it simply exists" (Josipovici 1971, 148); in fact, it was safer, in legal and ethical terms. Defoe's works made claims to veracity and actually convinced some readers that they were factual, but most readers today (and many then) had the pleasure of a double awareness of both fictiveness and a basis in the "real" – as do readers of contemporary historiographic metafiction.

In fact Michael Coetzee's novel, *Foe*, addresses precisely this question of the relation of "story"- and "history"-writing to "truth" and exclusion in the practice of Defoe. There is a direct link here to familiar assumptions of historiography: that

> every history is a history of some entity which existed for a reasonable period of time, that the historian wishes to state what is literally true of it in a sense which distinguishes the historian from a teller of fictitious or mendacious stories.
>
> (M. White 1963, 4)

Foe reveals that storytellers can certainly silence, exclude, and absent certain past events – and people – but it also suggests that historians have done the same: where are the women in the traditional histories of the eighteenth century? As we have seen, Coetzee offers the teasing fiction that Defoe did not write *Robinson Crusoe* from information from the male historical castaway, Alexander Selkirk, or from other travel accounts, but from information given him by a subsequently "silenced" woman, Susan Barton, who had also been a castaway on "Cruso"'s [sic] island. It was Cruso who suggested that she tell her story to a writer who would add "a dash of colour" to her tale. She at first resisted because she wanted the "truth" told, and Cruso admitted that a writer's "trade is in books, not in truth" (1986, 40). But Susan saw a problem: "If I cannot come foreward, as author, and swear to the truth of my tale, what will be the worth of it? I might as well have dreamed it in a snug bed in Chichester" (40).

Susan does tell Foe (he added the "De" only later, and so lost Coetzee's irony) her tale and his response is that of a novelist. Susan's reaction is irritation:

> You remarked it would have been better had Cruso rescued not only musket and powder and ball, but a carpenter's chest as well, and built himself a boat. I do not wish to be captious, but we lived on an island so buffeted by wind that there was not a tree did grow twisted and bent.
>
> (1986, 55)

In frustration, she begins her own tale: "The Female Castaway. Being a True Account of a Year Spent on a Desert Island. With Many Strange Circumstances Never Hitherto Related" (67), but discovers that the problems of writing history are not unlike those of writing fiction: "Are these enough

strange circumstances to make a story of? How long before I am driven to invent new and stranger circumstances: the salvage of tools and muskets from Cruso's ship; the building of a boat . . . a landing by cannibals . . . ?" (67). Her final decision is, however, that "what we accept in life we cannot accept in history" (67) – that is, lies and fabrications.

The linking of "fictitious" to "mendacious" stories (and histories) is one with which other historiographic metafictions also seem to be obsessed: *Famous Last Words*, *Legs*, *Waterland*, *Shame*. In the latter, Rushdie's narrator addresses openly the possible objections to his position as insider/outsider writing about the events of Pakistan from England – and in English:

> *Outsider! Trespasser! You have no right to this subject!* . . . I know: nobody ever arrested me [as they did the friend of whom he has just written]. Nor are they ever likely to. *Poacher! Pirate! We reject your authority. We know you, with your foreign language wrapped around you like a flag: speaking about us in your forked tongue, what can you tell but lies?* I reply with more questions: is history to be considered the property of the participants solely? In what courts are such claims staked, what boundary commissions map out the territories?
>
> (1983, 28)

The eighteenth-century concern for lies and falsity becomes a postmodern concern for the multiplicity and dispersion of truth(s), truth(s) relative to the specificity of place and culture. Yet the paradox is still there: in *Shame* we learn that when Pakistan was formed, the *Indian* history had to be written out of the Pakistani past. But who did this work? History was rewritten by immigrants, in Urdu and English, the imported tongues. As the narrator puts it, he is forced – by history – to write in English "and so for ever alter what is written" (38).

There has also been another, long tradition, dating (as we have just seen) from Aristotle, that makes fiction not only separate from, but also superior to, history, which is a mode of writing limited to the representation of the contingent, and the particular. The romantic and modernist assertions of the autonomy and supremacy of art led, however, as Jane Tompkins (1980b) has shown, to a marginalization of literature, one that extremes of metafiction (like American surfiction or the French New New Novel) only exacerbate. Historiographic metafiction, in deliberate contrast to what I would call such late modernist radical metafiction, attempts to demarginalize the literary through confrontation with the historical, and it does so both thematically and formally.

For example, Christa Wolf's *No Place on Earth* is about the fictionalized meeting of two historical figures, dramatist Heinrich von Kleist and poet Karoline von Günderrode: "The claim that they met: a legend that suits us. The town of Winkel, on the Rhine, we saw it ourselves." The "we" of the narrating voice, in the present, underlines the metafictive historical reconstruction on the level of form. But on the thematic level too, life and art meet, for this is the theme of the novel, as Wolf's Kleist tries to break down the

walls between "literary fantasies and the actualities of the world" (1982, 12), contesting his colleagues' separation of poets from praxis: "Of all the people here, perhaps there is none more intimately bound to the real world than I am" (82). It is he, after all, who is trying to write a romantic historical work about Robert Guiscard, Duke of Normandy. The metafictive and the historiographic also meet in the intertexts of the novel, for it is through them that Wolf fleshes out the cultural and historical context of this fictive meeting. The intertexts range from Günderrode's own letters to canonic romantic works like Hölderlin's *Hyperion*, Goethe's *Torquato Tasso*, and Brentano's *Gedichte* – but, in all, the theme is the conflict between art and life. This novel reminds us, as did Roland Barthes much earlier (1967) that the nineteenth century could be said to have given birth to both the realist novel and narrative history, two genres which share a desire to select, construct, and render self-sufficient and closed a narrative world that would be representational but still separate from changing experience and historical process. Today history and fiction share a need to contest these very assumptions.

II

> To the truth of art, external reality is irrelevant. Art creates its own reality, within which truth and the perfection of beauty is the infinite refinement of itself. History is very different. It is an empirical search for external truths, and for the best, most complete, and most profound external truths, in a maximal corresponding relationship with the absolute reality of the past events. *David Hackett Fischer*

These words are not without their ironic tone, of course, as Fischer is describing what he sees as a standard historian's preconception about the relation of art to history. But it is not far from a description of the basic assumptions of many kinds of formalist literary criticism. For I. A. Richards, literature consisted of "pseudo-statements" (1924); for Northrop Frye (1957), art was hypothetical, not real – that is verbal formulations which imitate real propositions; not unlike Sir Philip Sydney, structuralists argued that

> literature is not a discourse that can or must be false . . . it is a discourse that, precisely, cannot be subjected to the test of truth; it is neither true nor false, to raise this question has no meaning: this is what defines its very status as "fiction".
>
> (Todorov 1981a, 18)

Historiographic metafiction suggests that truth and falsity may indeed not be the right terms in which to discuss fiction, but not for the reasons offered above. Postmodern novels like *Flaubert's Parrot*, *Famous Last Words*, and *A Maggot* openly assert that there are only *truths* in the plural, and never one Truth; and there is rarely falseness *per se*, just others' truths. Fiction and history are narratives distinguished by their frames (see B. H. Smith 1978),

frames which historiographic metafiction first establishes and then crosses, positing both the generic contracts of fiction and of history. The postmodern paradoxes here are complex. The interaction of the historiographic and the metafictional foregrounds the rejection of the claims of both "authentic" representation and "inauthentic" copy alike, and the very meaning of artistic originality is as forcefully challenged as is the transparency of historical referentiality.

Postmodern fiction suggests that to re-write or to re-present the past in fiction and in history is, in both cases, to open it up to the present, to prevent it from being conclusive and teleological. Such is the teaching of novels like Susan Daitch's *L.C.*, with its double layer of historical reconstruction, both of which are presented with metafictional self-consciousness. Parts of the journal of the fictive protagonist, Lucienne Crozier, a woman implicated in yet marginalized as a witness of the historical 1848 revolution in Paris, are edited and translated twice: once by Willa Rehnfield and once by her younger assistant after her death. The recent interest in archival women's history is given an interesting new twist here, for the two translations of the end of Lucienne's diary are so vastly different that the entire activity of translation, as well as research, is called into question. In the more traditional Willa's version, Lucienne dies of consumption in Algiers, abandoned by her revolutionary lover. In the version of her more radical assistant (a veteran of Berkeley in 1968, being sought by the police for a terrorist bombing), Lucienne just stops writing, while awaiting arrest for revolutionary activities.

Other historiographic metafictions point to other implications of the rewriting of history. Ian Watson's *Chekhov's Journey* opens in the manner of a historical novel about Anton Chekhov's 1890 trip across Siberia to visit a convict colony. The next chapter, however, sets up a tension between this and a 1990 frame: at a Russian Artists' Retreat in the country, a film-maker, a scriptwriter, and a Chekhov look-alike actor meet to plan a film about that historical trip of 1890. The plan is to hypnotize the actor and tape his entry into Chekhov's personality and past. From these tapes, a script will emerge. However, they encounter a serious problem: the actor begins to *alter* the dates of verifiable historical events, moving the Tunguska explosion from 1888 to 1908. We are told that, from this point on, "the film project foundered further into a chaos of unhistory" (1983, 56). Suddenly a third narrative intervenes: a spaceship in the future is about to launch backwards into time past. (Meanwhile, at the Retreat, fog isolates the writing team in a timeless world; telephone circuits turn back on themselves; all links to the outside are cut.) The spaceship commander realizes that he is experiencing the rewriting of history: the 1908 explosion has regressed and become that of 1888, and both prefigure (repeat?) atomic blasts of an even later date. He is caught in a time loop which renders any firm sense of history or reality impossible. (At the Retreat, new books are found in the library, rewritten versions, not of history, but of literature: *Apple Orchard*, *Uncle Ivan*, *Three Cousins*, *Snow Goose*. Not that history remains unscathed: Joan of Arc, Trotsky, and others get changed out of recognition, in an allegory of not only Russian revisionary history, but also all our rewritings of the past, deliberate and accidental.)

This world of provisionality and indeterminacy is made even more complex when a consultation with the *Soviet Encyclopedia* confirms the actor's altered version of the Tunguska expedition. The team decides that their film, to be entitled (like the novel) *Chekhov's Journey*, will not be the experimental one they had envisaged, but *cinéma vérité*, despite the reader's awareness that it was the hypnotic tampering with time that brought on the time warp that blasted the *Cherry Orchard* and mutated the *Sea Gull* into a *Snow Goose*. As one of the team says:

> Past events can be altered. History gets rewritten. Well, we've just found that this applies to the real world too. . . . Maybe the real history of the world is changing constantly? And why? Because history is a fiction. It's a dream in the mind of humanity, forever striving . . . towards what? Towards perfection.
>
> (1983, 174)

The text provides the ironic context in which to read this last statement: the next thing mentioned is Auschwitz, and the echo of Joyce in the passage reminds us that, for him, history was not a dream, but a nightmare from which we are trying to awaken.

The problematizing of the nature of historical knowledge, in novels like this, points both to the need to separate and to the danger of separating fiction and history as narrative genres. This problematizing has also been in the foreground of much contemporary literary theory and philosophy of history, from Hayden White to Paul Veyne. When the latter calls history "a true novel" (1971, 10), he is signalling the two genres' shared conventions: selection, organization, diegesis, anecdote, temporal pacing, and emplotment (14, 15, 22, 29, 46–8). But this is not to say that history and fiction are part of the "same order of discourse" (Lindenberger 1984, 18). They are different, though they share social, cultural, and ideological contexts, as well as formal techniques. Novels (with the exception of some extreme surfictions) incorporate social and political history to some extent, though that extent will vary (Hough 1966, 113); historiography, in turn, is as structured, coherent, and teleological as any narrative fiction. It is not only the novel but history too that is "palpably betwixt and between" (Kermode 1968a, 235). Both historians and novelists *constitute* their subjects as possible objects of narrative representation, as Hayden White (1978a, 56) has argued (for history alone, however). And they do so by the very structures and language they use to present those subjects. In Jacques Ehrmann's extreme formulation: "history and literature have no existence in and of themselves. It is we who constitute them as the object of our understanding" (1981, 253). This is the teaching of texts like Doctorow's *Welcome to Hard Times*, a novel about the attempt to write history that shows historiography to be a most

problematic act: do we, in writing our past, even create our future? Is the return of the Bad Man from Bodie the past re-lived, or the past re-written?

Postmodernism deliberately confuses the notion that history's problem is verification, while fiction's is veracity (Berthoff 1970, 272). Both forms of narrative are signifying systems in our culture; both are what Doctorow once called modes of "mediating the world for the purpose of introducing meaning" (1983, 24). And it is the constructed, imposed nature of that meaning (and the seeming necessity for us to make meaning) that historiographic metafiction like Coover's *The Public Burning* reveals. This novel teaches that "history itself depends on conventions of narrative, language, and ideology in order to present an account of 'what really happened'" (Mazurek 1982, 29). Both history and fiction are cultural sign systems, ideological constructions whose ideology includes their appearance of being autonomous and self-contained. It is the metafictionality of these novels that underlines Doctorow's notion that

> history is kind of fiction in which we live and hope to survive, and fiction is a kind of speculative history . . . by which the available data for the composition is seen to be greater and more various in its sources than the historian supposes.
>
> (1983, 25)

Fredric Jameson has argued that historical representation is as surely in crisis as is the linear novel, and for much the same reasons:

> The most intelligent "solution" to such a crisis does not consist in abandoning historiography altogether, as an impossible aim and an ideological category all at once, but rather – as in the modernist aesthetic itself – in reorganizing its traditional procedures on a different level. Althusser's proposal seems the wisest in this situation: as old-fashioned narrative or "realistic" historiography becomes problematic, the historian should reformulate her vocation – not any longer to produce some vivid representation of history "as it really happened," but rather to produce the *concept* of history.
>
> (1984c, 180)

There is only one word I would change in this: the word "modernist" seems to me to be less apt than "postmodernist," though Jameson would never agree (see 1983; 1984a). Postmodern historiographic metafiction has done exactly what Jameson calls for here, though there is more a problematizing than just a production of a "*concept* of history" (and fiction). The two genres may be textual constructs, narratives which are both non-originary in their reliance on past intertexts and unavoidably ideologically laden, but they do not, in historiographic metafiction at least, "adopt equivalent representational procedures or constitute equivalent modes of cognition" (Foley 1986a, 35). However, there are (or have been) combinations of history and fiction which do attempt such equivalence.

III

> The binary opposition between fiction and fact is no longer relevant: in any differential system, it is the assertion of the space *between* the entities that matters. *Paul de Man*

Perhaps. But historiographic metafiction suggests the continuing relevance of such an opposition, even if it be a problematic one. Such novels both install and then blur the line between fiction and history. This kind of generic blurring has been a feature of literature since the classical epic and the Bible (see Weinstein 1976, 263), but the simultaneous and overt assertion and crossing of boundaries is more postmodern. Umberto Eco has claimed that there are three ways to narrate the past: the romance, the swashbuckling tale, and the historical novel. He has added that it was the latter that he intended to write in *The Name of the Rose* (1983, 1984, 74–5). Historical novels, he feels, "not only identify in the past the causes of what came later, but also trace the process through which those causes began slowly to produce their effects" (76). This is why his medieval characters, like John Banville's characters in his *Doctor Copernicus*, are made to talk like Wittgenstein, for instance. I would add, however, that this device points to a fourth way of narrating the past: historiographic metafiction – and not historical fiction – with its intense self-consciousness about the way in which all this is done.

What is the difference between postmodern fiction and what we usually think of as nineteenth-century historical fiction (though its forms persist today – see Fleishman 1971)? It is difficult to generalize about this latter complex genre because, as theorists have pointed out, history plays a great number of distinctly different roles, at different levels of generality, in its various manifestations. There seems little agreement as to whether the historical past is always presented as individualized, particularized, and past (that is, different from the present) (see Shaw 1983, 26; 48; 148) or whether that past is offered as typical and therefore present, or at least as sharing values through time with the present (Lukács 1962). While acknowledging the difficulties of definition (see also Turner 1979; Shaw 1983) that the historical novel shares with most genres, I would define historical fiction as that which is modelled on historiography to the extent that it is motivated and made operative by a notion of history as a shaping force (in the narrative and in human destiny) (see Fleishman 1971). However, it is Georg Lukács' influential and more particular definition that critics most frequently have to confront in their defining, and I am no exception.

Lukács felt that the historical novel could enact historical process by presenting a microcosm which generalizes and concentrates (1962, 39). The protagonist, therefore, should be a type, a synthesis of the general and particular, of "all the humanly and socially essential determinants." From this definition, it is clear that the protagonists of historiographic metafiction

are anything but proper types: they are the ex-centrics, the marginalized the peripheral figures of fictional history – the Coalhouse Walkers (in *Ragtime*), the Saleem Sinais (in *Midnight's Children*), the Fevvers (in *Nights at the Circus*). Even the historical personages take on different, particularized and ultimately ex-centric status: Doctor Copernicus (in the novel of that name), Houdini (in *Ragtime*), Richard Nixon (in *The Public Burning*). Historiographic metafiction espouses a postmodern ideology of plurality and recognition of difference; "type" has little function here, except as something to be ironically undercut. There is no sense of cultural universality. The protagonist of a postmodern novel like Doctorow's *Book of Daniel* is overtly specific, individual, culturally and familially conditioned in his response to history, both public and private. The narrative form enacts the fact that Daniel is not a type of anything, no matter how much he may try to see himself as representing the New Left or his parents' cause.

Related to this notion of type is Lukács's belief that the historical novel is defined by the relative unimportance of its use of detail, which he saw as "only a means of achieving historical faithfulness, for making concretely clear the historical necessity of a concrete situation" (1962, 59). Therefore accuracy or even truth of detail is irrelevant. Many readers of historical fiction would disagree, I suspect, as have writers of it (such as John Williams – 1973, 8–11). Postmodern fiction contests this defining characteristic in two different ways. First, historiographic metafiction plays upon the truth and lies of the historical record. In novels like *Foe*, *Burning Water*, or *Famous Last Words*, certain known historical details are deliberately falsified in order to foreground the possible mnemonic failures of recorded history and the constant potential for both deliberate and inadvertent error. The second difference lies in the way in which postmodern fiction actually uses detail or historical data. Historical fiction (*pace* Lukács) usually incorporates and assimilates these data in order to lend a feeling of verifiability (or an air of dense specificity and particularity) to the fictional world. Historiographic metafiction incorporates, but rarely assimilates such data. More often, the process of *attempting* to assimilate is what is foregrounded: we watch the narrators of Ondaatje's *Running in the Family* or Findley's *The Wars* trying to make sense of the historical facts they have collected. As readers, we see both the collecting and the attempts to make narrative order. Historiographic metafiction acknowledges the paradox of the *reality* of the past but its *textualized accessibility* to us today.

Lukács's third major defining characteristic of the historical novel is its relegation of historical personages to secondary roles. Clearly in postmodern novels like *Doctor Copernicus*, *Kepler*, *Legs* (about Jack Diamond), and *Antichthon* (about Giordano Bruno), this is hardly the case. In many historical novels, the real figures of the past are deployed to validate or authenticate the fictional world by their presence, as if to hide the joins between fiction and history in a formal and ontological sleight of hand. The metafictional self-reflexivity of postmodern novels prevents any such

subterfuge, and poses that ontological join as a problem: how do we know the past? What do (what can) we know of it now? For example Coover does considerable violence to the known history of the Rosenbergs in *The Public Burning*, but he does so to satiric ends, in the name of social critique. I do not think that he intends to construct a wilful betrayal of politically tragic events; perhaps, however, he does want to make a connection to the real world of political action through the reader – by making us aware of the need to question received versions of history. Historiographic metafiction's overt (and political) concern for its reception, for its reader, would challenge the following distinction:

> The discursive criterion that distinguishes narrative history from historical novel is that history evokes testing behavior in reception; historical discipline requires an author-reader contract that stipulates investigative equity. Historical novels are not histories, not because of a penchant for untruth, but because the author-reader contract denies the reader participation in the communal project.
>
> (Streuver 1985, 264)

In fact, as we have seen in Chapter 5, historiographic metafiction's emphasis on its enunciative situation – text, producer, receiver, historical, and social context – reinstalls a kind of (very problematic) communal project.

While the debates still rage about the definition of the historical novel, in the 1960s a new variant on the history/fiction confrontation came into being: the non-fictional novel. This differed from the treatment of recent factual events recounted as narrative history, as in William Manchester's *The Death of a President*. It was more a form of documentary narrative which deliberately used techniques of fiction in an overt manner and which usually made no pretence to objectivity of presentation. In the work of Hunter S. Thompson, Tom Wolfe, and Norman Mailer, the authorial structuring experience was often in the forefront as the new guarantee of "truth," as narrators individually attempted to perceive and impose pattern on what they saw about them. This metafictionality and provisionality obviously link the non-fictional novel to historiographic metafiction. But there are also significant differences.

It is probably not accidental that this form of the New Journalism, as it was called, was an American phenomenon. The Vietnam War created a real distrust of official "facts" as presented by the military and the media, and in addition, the ideology of the 1960s had licenced a revolt against homogenized forms of experience (Hellmann 1981, 8). The result was a kind of overtly personal and provisional journalism, autobiographical in impulse and performative in impact. The famous exception is Truman Capote's *In Cold Blood*, which is a modern rewriting of the realist novel – universalist in its assumptions and omniscient in its narrative technique. But in works like *The Electric Kool-Aid Acid Test*, *Fear and Loathing: On the Campaign Trail '72*, and *Of a Fire on the Moon*, there was a very "sixties" kind of direct confrontation with social reality in the present (Hollowell 1977, 10). The impact of the new

mixing of fiction and fact is clear on popular, if not academic, history in the years following: in *John Brown's Journey*, Albert Fried broke the rules and showed the tentative groping movement of his becoming interested in his historical topic. The book is "marked by the feeling of an historian in the act of grappling with his subject" (Weber 1980, 144), as the subtitle underlines: *Notes and Reflections on His America and Mine*.

Perhaps, too, the non-fictional novel in its journalistic variety influenced writers like Thomas Keneally who write historical novels, often of the recent past. The self-consciousness of the author's note that prefaces *Schindler's Ark* makes clear the paradoxes of Keneally's practice:

> I have attempted to avoid all fiction, though, since fiction would debase the record, and to distinguish between reality and the myths which are likely to attach themselves to a man of Oskar's stature. Sometimes it has been necessary to attempt to reconstruct conversations of which Oskar and others have left only the briefest record.
>
> (1982, 9–10)

At the beginning of the novel, Keneally points to his reconstructions (which he refuses to see as fictionalizations) by self-reflexive references to the reader ("In observing this small winter scene, we are on safe ground." – 13) or by conditional verb forms. Nevertheless, there is a progression from initial statements of possibility and probability ("it is possible that . . ." and "[they] now probably paid attention") to a generalized use of the (historical) past tense and a single authoritative voice, as the story continues. This is not historiographic metafiction, however much it may seem so in its early pages. Nor is it quite (or not consistently) an example of the New Journalism, despite its commitment to the "authority of fact" (Weber 1980, 36).

The non-fictional novel of the 1960s and 1970s did not just record the contemporary hysteria of history, as Robert Scholes has claimed (1968, 37). It did not just try to embrace "the fictional element inevitable in any reporting" and then try to imagine its "way toward the truth" (37). What it did was seriously question who determined and created that truth, and it was this particular aspect of it that perhaps enabled historiographic metafiction's more paradoxical questioning. A number of critics have seen parallels between the two forms, but seem to disagree completely on the form that parallel might take. For one, both stress the overt, totalizing power of the imagination of the writers to create unities (Hellmann 1981, 16); yet, for another, both refuse to neutralize contingency by reducing it to unified meaning (Zavarzadeh 1976, 41). I would agree with the former as a designation of the non-fictional novel, though not of all metafiction; and the latter certainly defines a lot of contemporary self-reflexive writing more accurately than it does the New Journalism. Historiographic metafiction, of course, paradoxically fits both definitions: it installs totalizing order, only to contest it, by its radical provisionality, intertextuality, and, often, fragmentation.

In many ways, the non-fiction novel is another late modernist creation (see Smart 1985, 3), in the sense that both its self-consciousness about its writing process and its stress on subjectivity (or psychological realism) recall Woolf and Joyce's experiments with limited, depth vision in narrative, though in the New Journalism, it is specifically the author whose historical presence as participant authorizes subjective response. Postmodern novels like Rudy Wiebe's *The Scorched-Wood People* parody this stance, however: Pierre Falcon, the narrating participant in the historical action, was real, but is still fictionalized in the novel: he is made to tell the tale of the historical Louis Riel from a point of time after his own death, with all the insights of retrospection and access to information he could not possibly have had as participant.

There are non-fictional novels, however, which come very close to historiographic metafiction in their form and content. Norman Mailer's *The Armies of the Night* is subtitled *History as a Novel, the Novel as History*. In each of the two parts of the book there is a moment in which the narrator addresses the reader on the conventions and devices used by novelists (1968, 152) and historians (245). His final decision seems to be that historiography ultimately fails experience and "the instincts of the novelist" have to take over (284). This self-reflexivity does not weaken, but on the contrary, strengthens and points to the direct level of historical engagement and reference of the text (cf. Bradbury 1983, 159). Like many postmodern novels, this provisionality and uncertainty (and the wilful and overt constructing of meaning too) do not "cast doubt upon their seriousness" (Butler 1980, 131), but rather define the new postmodern seriousness that acknowledges the limits and powers of "reporting" or writing of the past, recent or remote.

IV

> History is three-dimensional. It partakes of the nature of science, art, and philosophy. *Louis Gottschalk*

Postmodern novels raise a number of specific issues regarding the interaction of historiography and fiction that deserve more detailed study: issues surrounding the nature of identity and subjectivity; the question of reference and representation; the intertextual nature of the past; and the ideological implications of writing about history. Although these will subsequently be treated in separate chapters, a brief overview at this point will show where these issues fit into the poetics of postmodernism.

First of all, historiographic metafictions appear to privilege two modes of narration, both of which problematize the entire notion of subjectivity: multiple points of view (as in Thomas's *The White Hotel*) or an overtly controlling narrator (as in Swift's *Waterland*). In neither, however, do we find a subject confident of his/her ability to know the past with any certainty. This is not a transcending of history, but a problematized inscribing of

subjectivity into history. In a novel like *Midnight's Children*, nothing, not even the self's physical body, survives the instability caused by the rethinking of the past in non-developmental, non-continuous terms. To use the (appropriate) language of Michel Foucault, Saleem Sinai's body is exposed as "totally imprinted by history and the process of history's destruction of the body" (1977, 148). As we shall see in Chapter 10, postmodernism establishes, differentiates, and then disperses stable narrative voices (and bodies) that use memory to try to make sense of the past. It both installs and then subverts traditional concepts of subjectivity; it both asserts and is capable of shattering "the unity of man's being through which it was thought that he could extend his sovereignty to the events of the past" (Foucault 1977, 153). The protagonist's psychic disintegration in *Waterland* reflects such a shattering, but his strong narrative voice asserts that same selfhood, in a typically postmodern and paradoxical way. So too do the voices of those unreliable narrators of Burgess's *Earthly Powers* and Williams's *Star Turn*, the former "uncommitted to verifiable fact" (1980, 490) and the latter a self-confessed liar.

As we shall see in the next chapter, one of the postmodern ways of literally incorporating the textualized past into the text of the present is that of parody. In John Fowles's *A Maggot*, the parodic intertexts are both literary and historical. Interspersed throughout the book are pages from the 1736 *Gentleman's Magazine*, but there are many references to eighteenth-century drama as well, allusions that are formally motivated by the presence of actors in the plot. But it is to the fiction of the period that Fowles refers most often: its pornography, its prurient puritanism (as in Richardson's novels), but most of all, its mixing of fact and fiction, as in the writing of Defoe, whose "underlying approach and purpose" the narrator has consciously borrowed (1985, 449).

Postmodern intertextuality is a formal manifestation of both a desire to close the gap between past and present of the reader and a desire to rewrite the past in a new context. It is not a modernist desire to order the present through the past or to make the present look spare in contrast to the richness of the past (see Antin 1972, 106–14). It is not an attempt to void or avoid history. Instead it directly confronts the past of literature – and of historiography, for it too derives from other texts (documents). It uses and abuses those intertextual echoes, inscribing their powerful allusions and then subverting that power through irony. In all, there is little of the modernist sense of a unique, symbolic, visionary "work of art"; there are only texts, already written ones. Walter Hill's film *Crossroads* uses the biography and music of Robert Johnson to foreground the fictional Willie Brown and Lightening Boy, who pick up the Faustian challenge from the devil of his song, "Crossroads' Blues."

To what, though, does the very language of historiographic metafiction refer? To a world of history or one of fiction? It is commonly accepted that there is a radical disjunction between the basic assumptions underlying

these two notions of reference. History's referents are presumed to be real; fiction's are not. But, as Chapter 9 will investigate more fully, what postmodern novels teach is that, in both cases, they actually refer at the first level to other texts: we know the past (which really did exist) only through its textualized remains. Historiographic metafiction problematizes the activity of reference by refusing either to bracket the referent (as surfiction might) or to revel in it (as non-fictional novels might). This is not an emptying of the meaning of language, as Gerald Graff seems to think (1973, 397). The text still communicates – in fact, it does so very didactically. There is not so much "a loss of belief in a significant external reality" (403) as there is a loss of faith in our ability to (unproblematically) *know* that reality, and therefore to be able to represent it in language. Fiction and historiography are not different in this regard.

Postmodern fiction also poses new questions about reference. The issue is no longer "to what empirically real object in the past does the language of history refer?"; it is more "to which discursive context could this language belong? To which prior textualizations must we refer?" This is true in the visual arts as well, where the issue of reference is perhaps clearer. Sherrie Levine has framed Andreas Feininger's photographs of real subjects and has called *her* work "Photographs by Andreas Feininger." In other words, she frames the existing discourse to create a double remove from the real. In dance, Merce Cunningham's influence has led to postmodern choreography that not only uses visual or musical discourses, but also looks to concepts that would make movement freer of direct reference, in either a sculptural or expressive sense (Kirby 1975, 3–4).

Postmodern art is more complex and more problematic than extreme late modernist auto-representation might suggest, with its view that there is no presence, no external truth which verifies or unifies, that there is only self-reference (B. H. Smith 1978, 8–9). Historiographic metafiction self-consciously suggests this, but then uses it to signal the discursive nature of all reference – both literary and historiographical. The referent is always already inscribed in the discourses of our culture. This is no cause for despair; it is the text's major link with the "world," one that acknowledges its identity as construct, rather than as simulacrum of some "real" outside. Once again, this does not deny that the past "real" existed; it only conditions our mode of knowledge of that past. We can know it only through its traces, its relics. The question of reference depends on what John Searle (1975, 330) calls a shared "pretense" and what Stanley Fish calls being party to a set of "discourse agreements which are in effect decisions as to what can be stipulated as a fact" (1980, 242). In other words, a "fact" is discourse-defined; an "event" is not.

Postmodern art is not so much ambiguous as it is doubled and contradictory. There is a rethinking of the modernist tendency to move away from representation (Harkness 1982, 9) by both installing it materially and subverting it. In the visual arts, as in literature, there has been a rethinking

of the sign/referent relation in the face of the realization of the limits of self-reflexivity's separation from social practice (Menna 1984, 10). Historiographic metafiction shows fiction to be historically conditioned and history to be discursively structured, and in the process manages to broaden the debate about the ideological implications of the Foucaldian conjunction of power and knowledge – for readers and for history itself as a discipline. As the narrator of Rushdie's *Shame* puts it:

> History is natural selection. Mutant versions of the past struggle for dominance; new species of fact arise, and old, saurian truths go to the wall, blindfolded and smoking last cigarettes. Only the mutations of the strong survive. The weak, the anonymous, the defeated leave few marks. . . . History loves only those who dominate her: it is a relationship of mutual enslavement.
>
> (1983, 124)

The question of *whose* history survives is one that obsesses postmodern novels like Timothy Findley's *Famous Last Words*. In problematizing almost everything the historical novel once took for granted, historiographic metafiction destabilizes received notions of both history and fiction. To illustrate this change, let me take Barbara Foley's concise description of the paradigm of the nineteenth-century historical novel and insert in square brackets the postmodern changes:

> Characters [never] constitute a microcosmic portrayal of representative social types; they experience complications and conflicts that embody important tendencies [not] in historical development [whatever that might mean, but in narrative plotting, often traceable to other intertexts]; one or more world-historical figures enters the fictive world, lending an aura of extratextual validation to the text's generalizations and judgments [which are promptly undercut and questioned by the revealing of the true intertextual, rather than extratextual, identity of the sources of that validation]; the conclusion [never] reaffirms [but contests] the legitimacy of a norm that transforms social and political conflict into moral debate.
>
> (1986a, 160)

The premise of postmodern fiction is the same as that articulated by Hayden White regarding history: "every representation of the past has specifiable ideological implications" (1978b, 69). But the ideology of postmodernism is paradoxical, for it depends upon and draws its power from that which it contests. It is not truly radical; nor is it truly oppositional. But this does not mean it has no critical clout, as we shall see in Chapters 11 and 12. The Epiloguist of *A Maggot* may claim that what we have read is indeed "a maggot, not an attempt, either in fact or in language, to reproduce known history" (Fowles 1985, 449), but that does not stop him from extended ideological analyses of eighteenth-century social, sexual, and religious history. Thomas Pynchon's obsession with plots – narrative and conspiratorial – is an ideological one: his characters discover (or make) their own histories in an attempt to prevent themselves from being the passive victims of the commercial or political plots of others (Krafft 1984, 284). Similarly

contemporary philosophers of history like Michel de Certeau have reminded historiographers that no research of the past is free of socio-economic, political, and cultural conditions (1975, 65). Novels like *The Public Burning* or *Ragtime* do not trivialize the historical and the factual in their "game-playing" (Robertson 1984), but rather politicize them through their metafictional rethinking of the epistemological and ontological relations between history and fiction. Both are acknowledged as part of larger social and cultural discourses which various kinds of formalist literary criticism have relegated to the extrinsic and irrelevant. This said, it is also true that it is part of the postmodern ideology not to ignore cultural bias and interpretative conventions and to question authority – even its own.

All of these issues – subjectivity, intertextuality, reference, ideology – underlie the problematized relations between history and fiction in postmodernism. But many theorists today have pointed to narrative as the one concern that envelops all of these, for the process of narrativization has come to be seen as a central form of human comprehension, of imposition of meaning and formal coherence on the chaos of events (H. White 1981, 795; Jameson 1981a, 13; Mink 1978, 132). Narrative is what translates knowing into telling (H. White 1980, 5), and it is precisely this translation that obsesses postmodern fiction. The conventions of narrative in both historiography and novels, then, are not constraints, but enabling conditions of possibility of sense-making (W. Martin 1986). Their disruption or challenging is bound to upset such basic structuring notions as causality and logic – as happens with Oskar's drumming in *The Tin Drum*: narrative conventions are both installed and subverted. The refusal to integrate fragments (in novels like *The White Hotel*) is a refusal of the closure and telos which narrative usually demands (see Kermode 1966, 1967). In postmodern poetry too, as Marjorie Perloff has argued, narrative is used in works like Ashbery's "They Dream Only of America" or Dorn's *Slinger*, but used in order to question "the very nature of the *order* that a systematic plot structure implies" (1985, 158).

The issue of narrativity encompasses many others that point to the postmodern view that we can only know "reality" as it is produced and sustained by cultural representations of it (Owens 1982, 21). In historiographic metafictions, these are often not simple verbal representations, for ekphrases (or verbal representations of visual representations) often have central representational functions. For example in Carpentier's *Explosion in a Cathedral*, Goya's "Desastres de la guerra" series provides the works of visual art that actually are the sources of the novel's descriptions of revolutionary war. The seventh of that series, plus the "Dos de Mayo" and "Tres de Mayo," are particularly important, for their glorious associations are left aside by Carpentier, as an ironic signal of his own point of view. Of course, literary intertexts function in the narrative in a similar way. The details of Estaban and Sofía's house in Madrid come, in fact, from Torres

Villaroel's *Vida*, a book which Estaban had read earlier in the novel (see Saad 1983, 120–2; McCallum 1985).

Historiographic metafiction, like both historical fiction and narrative history, cannot avoid dealing with the problem of the status of their "facts" and of the nature of their evidence, their documents. And, obviously, the related issue is that of how those documentary sources are deployed: can they be objectively, neutrally related? Or does interpretation inevitably enter with narrativization? The epistemological question of how we know the past joins the ontological one of the status of the traces of that past. Needless to say, the postmodern raising of these questions offers few answers, but this provisionality does not result in some sort of historical relativism or presentism. It rejects projecting present beliefs and standards onto the past and asserts, in strong terms, the specificity and particularity of the individual past event. Nevertheless, it also realizes that we are epistemologically limited in our ability to know that past, since we are both spectators of and actors in the historical process. Historiographic metafiction suggests a distinction between "events" and "facts" that is one shared by many historians. Events, as I have been suggesting, are configured into facts by being related to "conceptual matrices within which they have to be imbedded if they are to count as facts" (Munz 1977, 15). Historiography and fiction, as we saw earlier, *constitute* their objects of attention; in other words, they decide which events will become facts. The postmodern problematization points to our unavoidable difficulties with the concreteness of events (in the archive, we can find only their textual traces to make into facts) and their accessibility. (Do we have a full trace or a partial one? What has been absented, discarded as non-fact material?) Dominick LaCapra has argued that all documents or artifacts used by historians are not neutral evidence for reconstructing phenomena which are assumed to have some independent existence outside them. All documents process information and the very way in which they do so is itself a historical fact that limits the documentary conception of historical knowledge (1985b, 45). This is the kind of insight that has led to a semiotics of history, for documents become signs of events which the historian transmutes into facts (B. Williams 1985, 40). They are also, of course, signs within already semiotically constructed contexts, themselves dependent upon institutions (if they are official records) or individuals (if they are eye-witness accounts). As in historiographic metafiction, the lesson here is that the past once existed, but that our historical knowledge of it is semiotically transmitted.

I do not mean to suggest that this is a radical, new insight. In 1910 Carl Becker wrote that "the facts of history do not exist for any historian until he creates them" (525), that representations of the past are selected to signify whatever the historian intends. It is this very difference between events (which have no meaning in themselves) and facts (which are given meaning) that postmodernism obsessively foregrounds. Even documents are selected as a function of a certain problem or point of view (Ricoeur 1984a, 108).

Historiographic metafiction often points to this fact by using the paratextual conventions of historiography (especially footnotes) to both inscribe and undermine the authority and objectivity of historical sources and explanations. Unlike the documentary novel as defined by Barbara Foley, what I have been calling postmodern fiction does not "aspire to tell the truth" (Foley 1986a, 26) as much as to question *whose* truth gets told. It does not so much associate "this truth with claims to empirical validation" as contest the ground of any claim to such validation. How can a historian (or a novelist) check any historical account against past empirical reality in order to test its validity? Facts are not given but are constructed by the kinds of questions we ask of events (H. White 1978b, 43). In the words of *Waterland*'s history teacher, the past is a "thing which cannot be eradicated, which accumulates and impinges" (Swift 1983, 109). What postmodern discourses – fictive and historiographic – ask is: how do we know and come to terms with such a complex "thing"?